

***"She":* The Veiled Reflection of the Femme Fatale's Fire**

by Allan R. Cook

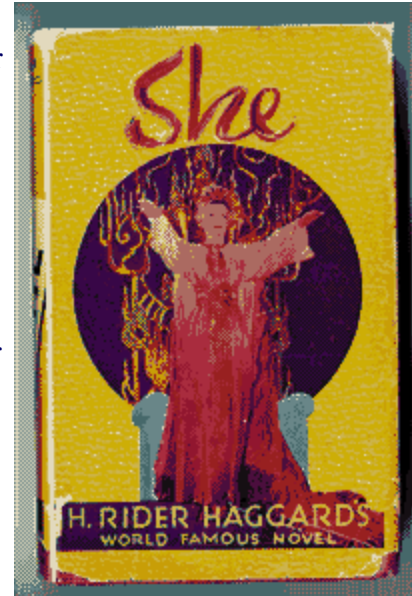
She-who-must-be-obeyed, Ayesha, the Queen of Death, the White Goddess of the lost city of Kôr who rules her kingdom with terror, She is the very image of the Femme Fatale. To disobey her or to scorn her is to earn & receive instantaneous death. For a man, to look upon her face is to fall hopelessly & vainly into madness; for a woman, it is to dissolve into futile, jealous obsession. Sir Henry Rider Haggard's creation, the character She, more than fits the image of the Femme Fatale; She-who-must-be-obeyed shows the concept's evolution from the redemptive but sensual beauties of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood through the darkly sensuous & deadly, androgynous mysteries of the Decadents & beyond. We see her condemned, reshaped, resurrected, redeemed & damned as Victorians in general & Rider Haggard in particular wrestle with their visions of beauty, honor & truth in the wake of industrial & scientific revolutions which had changed the face of England & the character of her citizens forever.

When Haggard began writing *She* in March 1886, he claimed the words flowed from his pen. He explains:

The fact is, that it was written at a white heat, almost without rest I remember that when I sat down to the task my ideas as to its development were of the vaguest. The only clear notion that I had in my head was that of an immortal woman inspired by an immortal love. All the rest shaped itself round this figure. (Cohen 97)

He completed the novel in six weeks & presented it to his literary agent A.P. Watt with the proclamation that that work would be the one he would be remembered for. Certainly, he created a new class of fantasy novel, the tale of the lost land & the lost race, but more than that he unveiled an intriguing character, a figure of dread power which continues to fascinate us more than one hundred years later. The phrase, She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, can be found verbatim on the English television series, "Rumpole of the Bailey." The somewhat pompous lead character, Rumpole, uses it to describe his domineering wife. Various popular novelty items like coffee mugs & sweat-shirts can be bought sporting the epigram. The American television series "Cheers" does not use the same words, but She is there. On "Cheers", she is known as Vera, a never-seen character with the power to terrorize the unflappable Norm. These vestiges remain in a society that has probably for the most part never heard of Rider Haggard's *She*.

Of course, there is humor here, the humor of the battle of the sexes, but it derives from the instinctual fear that battle for power initiates. The title triggers a reaction, a response that says this should not be. The implied overwhelming form of the force challenges nature & society; it breaks the rules & brings all into question. A woman, who can defeat death, & as we learn, create life while amassing the wisdom of the ages must be a formidable challenge to any society whether it be patriarchal or matriarchal. She must be isolated or destroyed. It helps little that she is not completely immortal, nor that her created races eventually wither & die out. She is a power, & even if we dismiss her as merely a creation of fantasy, which she is, she still remains a challenge to the concept of the Victorian woman, her successors & their place in society. Not just in fantasy does speaking make it so; a concept, once unveiled, grows with the simple question: Why not?



All that serves only as a beginning. Haggard sketched Ayesha with hasty fire & cast her into a simple, almost predictable pattern. But perhaps he wrought better than he knew & himself fell under the spell of his femme fatale. Despite her apparent & somewhat satisfying destruction in the flames of Kôr, Ayesha stubbornly refused to die. She returned first in *Ayesha: The Return of She* in 1904-5, then in *She & Allan* in 1921, combining with Haggard's other famous creation, Allan Quatermain who first appeared in *King Solomon's Mines*. Ayesha reappeared once more in 1923 in *Wisdom's Daughter: The Life & Love Story of She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied*. In all, three full length novels followed the original even though on November 15, 1917, Haggard wrote in his diary:

Alas! I have to give up my proposed 'She' story. It will not do. My hands are too tied by the contents of *She* and *Ayesha*. Also it is impossible to keep up interest in a tale laid beyond the confines of our Earth, since before it the average human imagination fails. So there's an end of She! I was reading *Ayesha* last night. It has weaknesses, but I must say I think it contains some fine things -- the transformation of Ayesha, for instance, & all that it symbolizes. If that is not good of its sort, I do not know what is. On the whole, I am glad I attempted the sequel, dangerous as it was. But there I think the venture had better end, although I had thought of some celestial -- or infernal -- scenes. (Higgins 121)

His later books certainly contained some "infernal scenes," but they were tied firmly to the knowable & safely imaginable world. Whatever vision he saw behind Ayesha's veil in 1917 remained obscured & only hinted at even in *Wisdom's Daughter*.

His initial, hasty vision of the deadly woman took on new dimensions over the 37-year span between the publishing of *She* & of *Wisdom's Daughter*. The series gives us the opportunity to see the rethinking of the concept of the femme fatale by a major Victorian writer as he lived through the decadent era of the *fin de siècle* & the disillusionment of "the War to end all war." His final, hesitant word comes at the opening moments of the modern era. For Haggard, the

promised future lacked the glitter & imagination of his own time. In his diary for 1923, he remarked that the modern woman seemed

"washed-out, thoroughly fagged . . . I think that the ladies of forty years ago were as a whole both better-looking & fresher in their air" (Higgins 261).

He remembered a conversation with Rudyard Kipling in which they agreed they were both

"out of touch with the times, but [Kipling] added grimly that these clever young men who are so loud in their self-praise & air their views so freely would learn their lesson before all was done. . . (Higgins 255)."

He finished the year with:

Xmas is over & I am glad. It is a sad season for the old & at the accustomed festival celebrated with holly, food & wine, whatever their lips may say the toast they drink in their hearts is one to the dead to whom -- or to whose habitations -- they draw near! At such times indeed these gather thick about the boards. . . I wonder who will go to church at Ditchingham on Xmas Day 2223 to worship at what altars. (Higgins 265)

Such undertones of loneliness & disappointment, probably common in the post-war years, seemed to surface for Haggard in his two last books of the Ayesha series. Perhaps he regretted never writing an acknowledged literary masterpiece. Instead, he spent much of his time "churning out romances," works "held to be so infinitely inferior to that of Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw & others" (Higgins 22). He had started the tale of She as a mere entertainment, but with *Wisdom's Daughter*, the goddess had grown into a woman. A disappointed Kipling wrote:

The more I went through it the more I was convinced it represented the whole sum & substance of your convictions along certain lines. . . the whole book is miles & miles above the head of the reader at large. . . Damn it man -- you have got the whole tragedy of the mystery of life under your hand, why not frame it in a wider setting? (This comes well from a chap who could not write a novel to save himself.)

. . . You are a whale on parables & allegories & one thing reflecting another. Don't cuss me. You wanted to know what I thought & so I send it to you. (Cohen 200)

His allegory contained his essence of truth, beauty & love. He termed it the supreme power, a concept he saw reflected in the image of the irresistibly seductive femme fatale.

The story, basic to each of the four novels, is the familiar one of the love-triangle. Its details emerge, along with many falsehoods & evasions, primarily from Ayesha herself. In *Wisdom's Daughter* she admits as much saying: "All these stories do not agree together, since often I spoke them as parables, or in order to tell to each that which he would wish to hear, or to hide my mind

for my own purposes" (1). Behind the seductive manipulation we glimpse the assumption of power.

In essence, the conflict is between Ayesha, the high-priestess of the Egyptian moon-goddess Isis, & Amenartes Nectanebes, daughter of the last pharaoh of Egypt. The prize is a Greek mercenary by the name of Kallikrates fighting for Egypt. This Kallikrates slays his own brother for the love of Amenartes. To escape punishment he deserts the army & becomes a priest of Isis. On hearing the story, Ayesha remarks: "Always the story is the same: two men & a woman, or two women & a man, & bloodshed & remorse & memories which will not die & the cry for pardon that is so hard to find" (Wisdom 33). She is, of course, speaking of her own doom. Despite her dedication to chastity & spiritual purity, she finds herself disturbed by the sight of the Adonis-like Kallikrates.

To escape persecution, & the vagaries of war-gone-wrong, Amenartes convinces Kallikrates to forget his oath of service to Isis & flee Egypt with her by boat. They vanish for twelve years. Meanwhile, the same fortunes of war force Ayesha & her followers of Isis to leave Egypt for the ancient land of Kôr. Only in the final novel do we discover that Kôr is the birth-place of the religion of Isis & its warriors founded Egypt centuries earlier. The three are reunited in the lost city of Kôr, but now Amenartes & Kallikrates have wed. Ayesha refuses to accept defeat & tempts Kallikrates with the secret of near-immortality. By bathing in the flames of the pillar of life, hidden in the caves of Kôr, they could cheat death & become rulers of the world if only he would desert Amenartes. He refuses, & in her rage Ayesha kills him, she says with a javelin. Later we learn it is with the power of her will. Amenartes, a sorceress in her own right, calls down the curses of heaven & hell on Ayesha & flees to Athens where she gives birth to Kallikrates' son. She names him Tisithenes, the mighty avenger, & begins a cult of revenge that will last for centuries. It is that cycle of revenge, victory & defeat which powers the saga of Ayesha & makes it a quest for absolution & mercy.

In the first book, Kôr is a dead land, but still wondrous in its ruined splendor. Surrounded by deadly swamps & impassable mountains & protected by wild, sullen cannibals, it sleeps apparently for 2,000 years until the male heroes, Leo Vincey & Horace Holly, appear to challenge its secrets & perhaps call down vengeance on its queen. They have been summoned by an ancient sherd or pottery apparently prepared by Amenartes. Its demand for blood directs Leo, the descendant or reincarnation of Kallikrates, to Libya & the caves of Kôr. There he & Holly find a city chiseled out of the mountain vastness with sophisticated engineering. A mountain lake, drained by a mammoth canal, still remains a dry plain even though the canal lies hidden by the swamps it created. A vast city, surrounded by a moat & short walls dominates the plain. In it lie fabulous sculptures & other abandoned works of art. Its intricate buildings impress as both grand & ingeniously comfortable, & yet the city is deserted except for its ghosts. Its queen has chosen to live in the city's burial mound, the place where its leaders had sought a kind of immortality in mummified splendor. Eventually it had become the burial place of a nation when a plague swept Kôr. A few escaped but most denizens found a final resting place in huge pits within Ayesha's palace.

The arrival of the reincarnated Kallikrates apparently sparks the appearance of a reincarnated Amenartes in the form of a native girl called Ustane. She challenges Ayesha & loses. Ayesha

kills her with the power of her will, then over her dead body seduces Leo. Leo & Holly agree to accompany Ayesha to the flame of life where they will bathe & become near-immortals. Holly first resists, then succumbs to her charms. Once at the flame, Leo becomes uncertain, so Ayesha proposes to enter the fire for a second time to prove it safe. She claims also that she wishes to rid herself of the hatred of Amenartes by purifying her soul in the flames. When she steps in, they do not purge in the way she expects. Instead, the original effect seems to be reversed. She withers into a shrunken monkey-shaped travesty of her former beauty. She appears to devolve & take on the full impact of her 2,000 years. Holly describes her last moments as:

. . . [she] raised herself upon her bony hands, & blindly gazed around her, swaying her head slowly from side to side as does a tortoise. She could not see, for her whitish eyes were covered with a horny film. Oh, the horrible pathos of the sight! But she could still speak.

'Kallikrates,' she said in husky, trembling tones. 'Forget me not, Kallikrates. Have pity on my shame; I die not. I shall come again, & shall once more be beautiful, I swear it -- it is true! (She 237)

In this incarnation, Ayesha is a powerful image of a popular description of the femme fatale. That is, she is the projection of male fears in some form or another onto an idealized perfection which is at once irresistible & loathsome. She is that powerful creature who stands outside of society's bounds, unconnected & unaccountable. Her power is virtually absolute. In this case, she has gathered the wisdom of 2,000 years, & unlike Swift's Struldbruggs, she remembers & understands it all. She can see distant lands at will with her sorcery. She can create life & form it to her will as with her races of giants & mutes. She can kill by wishing it so & does. She is implacable & unnervingly logical. She rules her empire with terror because she must. To do so she metes out terrible & swift punishment for any who dare to disobey her, but she insists the cruel tortures are for effect only. Holly tries to intercede on behalf of a group of Amahager who had tried to kill & eat him & Leo, but Ayesha insists on torture followed by "hot-potting," placing of a white hot cooking pot over the head of the victim. She explains:

My empire is of the imagination. Once in a lifetime mayhap I do as I have done but now, & slay a score by torture. Believe not that I would be cruel, or take vengeance on anything so low. What can it profit me to be avenged on such as these? Those who live long, my Holly, have no passions, save where they have interests. (She 148)

The impersonal nature of her exercise of power suggests the description of the femme fatale proposed by Mary Ann Doane in the introduction to her *Femmes Fatales*. She describes the femme fatale as not subject to her power, but rather the carrier of it. Doane notes, "She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable" (Doane 1). She emphasizes the suggestion of disease which we can certainly link to Ayesha & her palace of death by plague & the degeneration of her Amahager subjects. Doane also cites Virginia M. Allen to explain that, "it is appropriate that the femme fatale is represented as the antithesis of the maternal -- sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production" (Doane 2). The virgin priestess, Ayesha, remains so for 2,000 years, bringing only death to her lovers & decay to her city. An important aspect of Doane's description is that the femme fatale must have power despite herself. With that, the figure enters the realm of psychoanalysis. By centering the source

of power elsewhere than the self, the accepted stability of the ego is challenged. In *She*, neither the uncontrollable nature of Ayesha's desire nor its source are overtly evident. She seems driven by pride & ambition to challenge the gods & is eventually destroyed for her sin. However, as we will learn in *Wisdom's Daughter*, she is not in control of her passions, but is in fact the victim of them.

That she exerts an almost unconscious power over men is clear. She goes veiled because to look upon her is to go mad with desire. That loss of control fits nicely with Doane's suggestion of a male fear of castration. Leo succumbs to her charms even as she kills his wife, Ustane. Even the presence of her body does not hinder the seduction. Holly, a stronger figure intellectually & a sworn misogynist, falls hopelessly & vainly in love with her even though she only toys with his affections out of boredom. Finally, her challenging of the gods, all gods, & the stability of the male hierarchy of Victorian England paints her decidedly evil. The logical outcome must be her eventual death & moral humbling which is exactly what happens in the flames of life.

We get a similar explanation from a literary point of view from Morton N. Cohen drawing on Mario Praz's *Romantic Agony*. Praz notes the Victorian Byronic hero of Ayesha's time is faltering due to either a weak will or an incapacitating conscience, both concerns for Leo. His place is being usurped by his female counterpart who is the femme fatale, beautiful but also destructive & implacable. As the hero weakens, the femme fatale grows into a superwoman. Cohen describes the trend as:

. . . a reversal of roles, which aids the movement toward decadence. Exoticism accompanies the reversal & is part of the strange woman's appeal. Exoticism is furthermore allied to mysticism. By the later part of the century, the fatal woman turns up frequently in the literature of the period: she is Rosetti's Sister Helen, Pater's Mona Lisa, Swinburne's Atalanta. She is the heartless beauty, the eternally pitiless woman. Ayesha, huge, cold, & beautiful, passes in this parade of fictional Victorian superwomen. She is a closer blood relative to Wilde's Salomé . . . than to the fainting heroines in Haggard's modern novels or to the characters in the books for boys with whom she is often shelved. (Cohen 112)

However, Ayesha is not entirely heartless nor eternally pitiless. She kills Ustane only after warning her three times to abandon her vain love for Leo & obey her omnipotent queen. She tempts Holly playfully, but regrets her actions which compromise what she calls a moral & good man. She enters the flames of life to purge her hatred of her rival Amenartes from her soul in the hope of controlling her ambition & pride. In all things, she claims to have been driven by love. She pleads her case with Leo saying:

I have sinned -- out of the bitterness born of a great love have I sinned -- yet do I know the good from the evil, nor is my heart altogether hardened. Thy love, Kallikrates, shall be the gate of my redemption, even as aforetime my passion was the path down which I ran to ill. For love unsatisfied is the hell of noble hearts & a portion for the accursed, but love that is mirrored back more perfect from the soul of our desired doth fashion wings to lift us above ourselves, & make us what we might be. (She 228)

What she wishes to be is the ideal Victorian wife. She has already waited patiently & apparently faithfully for 2,000 years. At the edge of the flame, she offers fidelity saying:

I swear, even in this first most holy hour of completed Womanhood, that I will cherish Good & abandon Evil. I swear that I will be ever guided by thy voice in the straightest path of duty. I swear that I will eschew Ambition & through all my length of endless days set Wisdom over me as a ruling star to lead me unto Truth & a knowledge of the Right. I swear also that I will honour & will cherish thee, Kallikrates, who hast been swept by the wave of time back into my arms. (She 229)

In these words we hear the echoes of Rosetti's "Blessed Damozel" with its suggestion of redemption in a shockingly sensual heaven which seems to have misplaced its God.

In essence, that is the source of the great fear of Ayesha. On the one hand, she has tasted of the great mystery of life; she has seen beyond the Victorian veil that separates life & death & holds the key to the forbidden gateway. On the other hand, as Cohen points out, the symbol of fire triggers unconscious responses in the reader. It is the universal mystery, for both primitive & civilized peoples. It encompasses life & death, both spiritually & physically. It describes the passion of faith & corporeal love. Fire consumes & destroys & yet brings & sustains life. It suggests warmth, food, companionship & especially the hearth of home. Ultimately, it symbolizes the mother, particularly the natural mother, a sign of the feminine (Cohen 110). However, Ayesha is not natural, & we are relieved when Nature reclaims her with its mysterious fire. We are content not to know the mystery of the universe now that the unnatural woman has been destroyed & possibly redeemed by her contrition & the power of her faithful love.

In *Ayesha: The Return of She*, Haggard focuses his attention on the two women. The conflict remains the same, & ultimately so does the outcome. The difference lies in the portrayal of the Amenartes figure. *She* shows Ustane/Amenartes as a simple depiction of faithful but tragic love. She is powerless against her queen, Ayesha, & equally powerless to escape her fate of loving Leo. She is the natural woman & the early Victorian ideal, the tragic heroine.

But in *Ayesha*, she takes on a different role. Atene, the Amenartes figure in this story, is anything but helpless. She rescues both Leo & Holly when they fall exhausted into a glacier fed river. We learn that she has manipulated the ruler of the kingdom of Kaloon to marry her & then fed him poison on the wedding night. It drives him insane & leaves him impotent & afraid. Still, he cannot shake his fascination of his deadly queen, & jealously pursues & murders any man he feels may be attracted to her. Young, she is herself beautiful but lacks the wisdom of experience. Secure in her new-found power after Leo kills her husband, Atene challenges Ayesha for the love of Leo & once again loses. In her sensual power & willful abandon, backed by a form of cold, predatory logic, we can see the eyes & sinuous undulations of Oscar Wilde's Salomé. Strong-willed & self-absorbed, she reflects Haggard's familiarity with that literary figure & the decadent period. She is driven by her own unconscious desires until they finally destroy her. She protests her bewilderment to Holly saying:

You must believe. . . that I, who have ever hated men, that I -- I swear that it is true -- whose lips are purer than those mountain snows, I, the Khania of Kaloön, whom they name Heart-of-Ice, am but a shameless thing. . . . It was more than love. I was possessed, & that night I knew not what I did. A Power drove me on, a Destiny compelled me; & to the end I am his, & his alone. Yes I am his & I swear that he shall be mine. (Ayesha 45)

Ayesha, as the Hesea or ruler of the mountain Sanctuary of Isis, begins as a much humbler incarnation of that spirit. Wrapped in winding sheets, she silently guides Leo & Holly towards her stronghold. When challenged by Atene on the road, she shows her rival only enough of her power to silence her. Later, when Atene pushes her challenge in the hall of the pillars of flame, Ayesha agrees to unveil & allow Leo to make his final choice. What she reveals is the hideous creature, deformed by the flames of life in the caves of Kôr. Ayesha had not been killed, but only transported to the last temple of Isis, located in the frozen isolation of Tibet. Revealed in her shame, Ayesha calls on Leo to make his choice reminding him that:

. . . whate'er I am, I became it for they sake, Kallikrates. Yet, yet I also am athirst for knowledge; for though I know all wisdom, although I wield much power, one thing remains to me to learn -- what is the worth of the love of man, & if, indeed, it can live beyond the horrors of the grave. (Ayesha 118)

Atene, secure in her own beauty, pushes her case reminding the wavering Leo that she too has sacrificed all to him out of love & can offer him passion, happiness & perhaps children. Here we see the choice of the femme fatale syndrome. Haggard has created two women: one a powerful intellect who is in her own way still spiritually pure, the other passion & beauty incarnate. His hero must choose one or the other, the virgin or the whore, spiritual redemption or fleshy fulfillment. Leo chooses Ayesha & she begs her goddess for forgiveness praying:

. . . merciful Mother that bore me, to Thee I make my prayer. Oh, let his true love atone my sin; or, if it may not be, then give me death, the last & most blessed of Thy boons! (Ayesha 121)

Her prayer apparently answered, she is transformed into the supreme beauty that is She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed. Atene's natural beauty pales in comparison & she strikes out vainly trying to destroy her unnatural rival. Failing again, she retreats leaving Ayesha to the judgement of Heaven & reminds that "man & spirit cannot mate" (Ayesha 126).

There follows a period of time in which Ayesha, Leo & Holly contemplate the future. Ayesha plans the domination of the world over which she will place Leo as ruler. Leo begins to wonder what bargain he has struck & at what cost. In her perfection, Ayesha dominates Leo & yet refuses to grant that physical union he so desires because he has not yet bathed in the protecting flames of Kôr.

Leo & Holly discover that she is the Queen of the Dead, holding court at night in the Sanctuary's great hall. The testing of Leo's love is not yet complete; he must yet make his final choice once all has been revealed to him about his femme fatale. Ayesha challenges his male projections of her in terms that Doane would applaud. She says:

Leo Vincey, know now the truth: that all things are illusions, even that there exists no future & no past, that what has been & what shall be already *is* eternally. Know that I, Ayesha, am but a magic wraith, foul when thou seest me foul, fair when thou seest me fair; a spirit-bubble reflecting a thousand lights in the sunshine of thy smile, grey as dust & gone in the shadow of thy frown. Think of the throned Queen before whom the shadowy Powers bowed, & worship, for that is I. Think of the hideous, withered Thing thou sawest naked on the rock, & flee away, for that is I. Now, Leo, thou has the truth. Put me from thee for ever & for ever if thou wilt & be safe; or clasp me, clasp me to thy heart, & in payment for my lips & love take my sin upon thy head! (Ayesha 135)

Leo chooses to redeem her, taking her sin to give his own life meaning, but still she refuses to wed until he tastes the flame. She fears that in the moment of her triumph, her prize will once more be snatched from her & she condemned to wait in uncertain anticipation through thousands of years more.

Using her sorceress vision to watch over him when he is away from her side, she sees Leo fighting a leopard on the mountain slopes. He had ventured out on a hunting expedition with some of the natives then dared the beast with just his hunting knife. He kills the wild cat, but Ayesha, terrified by her inability to protect him, turns on his companions & orders them killed. Leo intervenes & vows to die with them if she will not relent. To appease him, she does reluctantly. The episode is only one of several showing the growing power of Ayesha & her domination of Leo. Allegorically, she is castrating him, smothering him with a possessive, jealous love.

In fact the match between Ayesha & Leo seems doomed. Leo has agreed to it as a kind of martyrdom which purges his unworthy self to attain the perfection of Ayesha. He is ultimately a romantic figure & his dream will vanish at the moment of attainment. He seems better mated with Atene or at least Amenartes. He is weak only in comparison to Ayesha & in that contrast we see some of the fear of the femme fatale as a projection of man's fear of domination. Man admires her strength, but in his uncertain heart, doubts he could tame or even match her.

Atene's final challenge to Ayesha is war. She attacks the Sanctuary & kidnaps Leo, but Ayesha responds with calculated force. To rescue Leo, she must destroy the city of Kaloon & kill 60,000 men with the forces of nature at her disposal. She does. Atene chooses not to kill Leo, even though she has the opportunity, but kills herself instead. She leaves Leo to his own destiny &, in her words, goes on to prepare for their next encounter when she will try the game again. Then, over the vanquished body of her rival once more, Ayesha claims her prize & crowns Leo, ruler of the world. She swears to give him anything he desires & he claims her oath saying:

Ayesha, I am no god; I am a man, & as a man I seek the woman whom I love. Oh! divest thyself of all these wrappings of thy power -- that power which strews thy path with dead & keeps me apart from thee. If only for one little hour, forget the ambition that gnaws unceasingly at thy soul; I say forget thy greatness & be a woman & -- my wife. (Ayesha 178)

The dominant male hierarchy in Haggard's psyche, having rid itself of the decadent temptress Atene now seeks to force the powerful "new woman" back into her place in Victorian society. Holly describes her acquiescence saying:

Ayesha grew human; I could see her heart beat beneath her robes, & hear her breath come in soft, sweet sobs, while o'er her upturned face & in her alluring eyes there spread itself that look which is born of love alone. Radiant & more radiant did she seem to grow, sweeter & more sweet, no longer the veiled hermit of the Caves, no longer the Oracle of the Sanctuary, no longer the Valkyrie of the battleplain, but only the loveliest & most happy bride that ever gladdened a husband's eyes. (Ayesha 179)

But Leo is destroyed, consumed by the fire of their consummating kiss, he falls once more into the dead arms of Atene. At the culminating moment, the dream vanishes & the fantasy collapses.

Haggard seems to be aware of the power of projection to create the femme & the homme fatale. Ultimately, it is Atene who makes the "correct" choice, leaving Leo to his own destiny rather than forcing her own on him. With that action, she earns our sympathy & once again becomes the pitied victim. However, Ayesha believes her immortal love has proven true & prepares to discard her trappings of power. With the dead body of Leo at her side, she seems to ask her goddess for death & the two are wafted upwards into the heavens in sheets of flames. Moments before she had parted from Holly saying:

Think not that I am conquered, for now my name is Victory! Think not that Ayesha's strength is spent or her tale is done, for of it thou readest but a single page. Think not even that I am to-day that thing of sin & pride, the Ayesha thou didst adore & fear, I who in my lord's love & sacrifice have again conceived my soul. For know that now once more, as at the beginning, his soul & mine are *one*. (Ayesha 186)

The words have the same familiar ring as those she spoke in the Caves of Kôr before being consumed by the fire & reclaimed by Nature. In those echoes, we can see her continuing struggle to regain her spiritual purity. Haggard drives the point home when he has Holly return to a Tibetan monastery he & Leo had visited earlier where he tells the story to a wise, old monk. The monk agrees with Holly that each person involved has won some "merit on the Everlasting Plane" but the woman, Ayesha, seems to be learning most slowly.

With that transcendent scene, the story of Ayesha is complete at least as far as what transpired on this world is concerned. Perhaps Haggard intended to write the story of the continuing conflict or its reconciliation in the next world. That is in keeping with his mention of tales laid beyond the confines of this earth. However, he never wrote that novel. Instead, his final two books filled in portions of the saga which had only been sketched before.

In *She & Allan*, we learn that Ayesha had not lived in the total isolation from the world as we had been led to believe. With her mind, she communed with wizards & sorcerers around the world, bargaining for knowledge & advantage. The story falls primarily into the category of an

Allan Quatermain romance, but still we learn much of Ayesha & why she remains in self-imposed imprisonment within her mountain morgue. At the same time, Haggard continues to explore that final truth for which Ayesha declared she was searching: can love survive the horrors of the grave?

The mystery of what lies beyond the veil starts Quatermain on this adventure as he, approaching older age, begins to wonder about those who went before him. He says he would like to know if they still live on in some fashion, in some other place. Not surprisingly, it is a question no cleric or mystic can answer satisfactorily for him, but one particularly disreputable dwarf wizard by the name of Zikali, says he knows where he can find the answers. He proposes Quatermain trek to Ayesha's mountain stronghold in the company of a certain Zulu, axe-wielding chief on an errand for him. It turns out the Zulu has similar questions for the White Witch. Quatermain resists going on the journey but events seem to conspire against him. As a final straw, a young woman is kidnapped by rebelling Amahagers who wish to set her up as a rival white queen to Ayesha. The chase ensues & the woman is rescued after a series of battles & a final single-combat between the giant leader of the rebels & the Zulu axe-man.

Quatermain, the typical Victorian cynic, refuses to believe Ayesha's claims of long life. His mocking doubt prompts her to tell more of her past than we have heard before. We learn that she, as the envoy of Isis on earth, attracted the enmity of Aphrodite because of her beauty & her chastity. Aphrodite curses her with eternal love for Kallikrates even though he is a match unworthy of her. The haughty goddess of love warns Ayesha not to dream of escaping her doom because

"however strong the spirit, here upon the earth the flesh is stronger still & of all flesh I am the queen" (Allan 161).

Ayesha succumbs, pleading for the love of Kallikrates & so earns the doom of Isis. That mother goddess adds to Aphrodite's curse, which she says she would have removed had Ayesha trusted her. She declares that Ayesha, already fallen in thought, will learn the secret of near-immortality & perpetual youthful beauty, but that she will kill her lover. Her doom then is to remain in desolate solitude until he should return to her. Nor will she be released from her torment & self-loathing until she has drawn up Kallikrates' soul to where he too can be redeemed from the world of flesh by the universe of spirit. Ayesha decries her punishment calling it unjust that because she could not resist the will of a goddess she must suffer a cruel fate. Isis suggests that part of her coming lesson is to learn humility (Allan 162-163).

With this revelation, we see Ayesha as the plaything of the gods, forced to live out her existence for their entertainment, but Haggard shifts the ground slightly when he has Ayesha explain to Quatermain that these goddesses are "great Principles of Nature" (Allan 165). They are, in fact allegories for passion & spirituality, making Ayesha's actions once again the product of her own sub-conscious. Even so, she still carries with her the scent of the victim, yet another trait of the femme fatale.

Quatermain & the Zulu earn an answer to their metaphysical questions with their military prowess. Ayesha, the keeper of the key to the forbidden gateway, sends them to the underworld,

letting them die, almost. There, each discovers they are virtually unperceived even by those who, in life, meant the most to them. Quatermain finds his family & his two lost loves but they do not sense his presence. The only ones who do perceive him are the savage Mameena who declares she loves him with "a woman's love of the earth," & the dog who died protecting him from a wildebeest (Allan 261-262).

Discussing the dream-like encounter later with Ayesha, Quatermain grudgingly comes to the conclusion that he has been vain in his assumption that his memory & importance would stretch beyond the veil & influence those who have gone before. He sums up the experience with:

Why on earth, or rather beyond the earth, should anyone desire to remain unalterably bound to & inextricably wrapped up in such a personality as my own, especially if others of superior texture abounded about them? Now that I came to think of it, the thing was absurd & not to be expected in the least in the midst of a thousand new & vivid interests. I had met with one more disillusionment, that was all. (Allan 267)

He had also stumbled over the beginnings of a new philosophy which fitted well into his cynical questioning of all things: "*man must answer to himself*" (Allan 257).

These two concepts cast doubt on the maxim of eternal love conquering all which powers the two earlier novels. Now that love takes on the texture of vanity or perhaps that ultimate Greek tragic flaw, *hubris*.

The final book, *Wisdom's Daughter*, takes us back to the beginning, to the time when Ayesha was a beautiful but young priestess of the Egyptian moon-goddess, Isis & the world was changing. The balance of power was shifting from Egypt to Persia, & the old gods were giving way to the new. In this text, the characters we met earlier come to life as Haggard expands the entertainment into an allegory & completes his portrait of the femme fatale.

The manuscript came from the coded diary of Ayesha, discovered among Holly's effects after his death. For the first time, we have her direct words, describing her story through her eyes. Again it does not tell the entire story, but rather ends at a particularly telling point in the saga. The diary breaks off at the moment Ayesha spies Leo wrestling with the leopard on the Tibetan mountainside. That is before she wars with Atene & before she kills Leo with her kiss & before she decides to shed her power & leave the world. We hear the story from Ayesha at the pinnacle of her power, having waited out her curse, repulsed her rival & received her reward. It is an Ayesha who does not yet understand her doom.

We learn that Ayesha was once Ayesha the Beautiful, daughter & heiress of Yarab the great chief who could call twenty thousand spears to his standards. When she was born, her mother killed herself because she feared to compete with such a beautiful daughter for her father's affections & that she would come to hate any other children because they could never be so fair. In her youth, princes fought each other for her affections, but she scorned them all. She declared:

I desired to marry no man that I might become a slave, cooped up in a fortress to bear children that I did not desire with some jealous tyrant for their father. Nay, being higher-hearted than any of my time, already I sought to rule the world, & if I must have any lover, to choose one whom I wished &, when I wished, to have done with him. (Wisdom 13)

However, her father is killed by Nectanebes, the pharaoh of Egypt & Ayesha swears revenge.

Alone in the Valley of Dead Kings, she sees how fleeting mortal glory can be & sets her sights on spiritual perfection. She enters the service of the goddess Isis but her flesh is tempted by the sight of Kallikrates. She claims she tries to put him from her mind & resist the temptations of the flesh but that fate had decreed otherwise. However, when forced to unveil before Tenes, King of Sidon, she is angered that Kallikrates, acting as her priest-servant, is unmoved by her beauty. Instead, he seems mesmerized by that of the watching Amenartes (Wisdom 64).

She is assisted by a wise man called Noot. We saw him in *She* as the dead guardian of the flame of life at Kôr. He guides Ayesha on her spiritual path. At one point he advises:

Beauty is your curse, because to it you demand obedience, although of it you should think nothing, remembering its end. You are too proud, you are too puffed up. Look upon the stars & learn to be humble, lest you should be humbled by that which is stronger. (Wisdom 138)

Later, at the fire of life, he cautions Ayesha not to enter the flames in search of immortal beauty, that if she does she will "become but a painted mummy in a tomb, simulating life, yet dead & cold within" (Wisdom 224). However, faced with her declining beauty, no longer a match for the youthful vitality of the royal Amenartes, & stung by her rival's taunts & the awareness of her own nearing mortality, she forgets Noot's wisdom & accepts the flames.

They offer a chance to regain past glories, apparently squandered by powers beyond her control. She has lost her family & her royal heritage. Her religion of Isis of which she is the highest priestess is banished & nearly forgotten. She is exiled from her homeland & forced to live in a decaying ruin of a vanished civilization. Before her stretches a long, improbable struggle to wrest that city back to glory with the help of only a handful of faithful followers. Most important, she is alone. The woman who expected the worship of the world, must face bitter, old-age alone, & yet before her stands the object of her desire & the power to take it. What is more, with it comes the responsibility & the opportunity to draw up the soul of her beloved to a higher spiritual plane so that he might attain perfection with her. Here, in a perverted way, is another Victorian image of the woman as spiritual redeemer. As the Angel of the House, she provides the moral balance for the natural corruption of passionate man & offers the pathway to salvation.

Kallikrates, the object of her desire, resists her but is overwhelmed by the power of her will. This is not the weak Leo we have seen earlier, but a hero who is at worst mortal. He is torn between his own desires & sees them personified in the two women. In Ayesha, he loves the goddess, the ascendant spirituality & the ambition to challenge the universe & win. In Amenartes, he loves the flesh, the familiar comfort of home & tradition & the immortality of family. Only after she kills Kallikrates does Ayesha come to realize that, in this way, a man may love two women at once. This war between the spirit & the flesh meant that, "The spirit of Kallikrates was always

[hers], having been given to [her] from the beginning, but with his flesh it was otherwise, & perchance while he is in the flesh it will so remain" (Wisdom 141).

Earlier, Amenartes has appeared as the helpless victim or herself a deadly femme fatale lacking only Ayesha's power. Here, she becomes more human. She is the spoiled daughter of the last Egyptian Pharaoh & acts the part, but her pettiness is harmless. Her scheming amounts to little more than mild court intrigue, even when she manipulates her father & saves Kallikrates' life before either of the men realize it is in danger. She honestly loves Kallikrates & seeks to protect him & be with him. Her final appeal, the one that anchors Kallikrates to her in spite of Ayesha's terrible power, is to the blood of their dead son. That baby we never see "died of hardships that caused his mother's milk to fail" (Wisdom 253). With that revelation, we have a reading for Amenartes' part in Haggard's allegory. She is a woman of nature with a natural, earthy love, just as Mameena in *She & Allan*, but she almost became a femme fatale or unnatural woman when forced to strive alone & to bend Kallikrates to her will.

In order to fend off her loneliness & sense of impotence, Ayesha stole the fire of the gods only to find herself " *alone & could no more speak with Heaven* " (Wisdom 278). Her loyal retainer, Philo, makes the point again after she returns to Kôr saying:

Daughter of Wisdom, such loveliness as you wear to-day is the greatest curse that the gods can grant to woman, because being above Nature, all Nature must obey its might. . . . Henceforth you are an alien to the kindly race of men, a beauteous terror that all must desire & yet all fear & hate. (Wisdom 293)

That is the part of the lesson the Daughter of Wisdom does learn, but she also expects forgiveness & absolution if her love proves true & she can redeem the soul of the man she once slew & will slay again. She has yet to learn that her true sin is vanity & to gain mercy she must first lay down that burden of love she so treasures as hers alone.

In this final book of the Ayesha saga, Ayesha is ordered back to the city of Kôr by the goddess Isis. That is, she is recalled to the place from which her ancestors had been forced to leave because of a plague. She is commanded to rebuild the religion of Isis & the glory of the city of Kôr & its citizens. On arriving in the city she is met by the goddess-appointed guardian of the flame Noot who has spent many years in watchful isolation protecting the goddess' secrets. This has the familiar feel of the story of the Garden of Eden, but this garden is not natural, but rather one of human ingenuity, what Ayesha calls wisdom. Within it, she faces years of toil & strife for little apparent gain. Kallikrates fits well as the passive Adam figure, but for Eve we have two faces: the spiritual Ayesha & the sensual Amenartes. It is fitting that the curious seeker after wisdom, Ayesha is the one to taste of the secret of immortality, while the natural-mother figure, Amenartes, looks on in horror & condemnation. It should not surprise that the gods pre-ordained Ayesha's fall. The battle of spirit & flesh in which these two women are the opposing poles encompasses them both in one archetypal figure. They are in fact one woman torn by those conflicting, internalized desires of self & community.

The taming of the wilderness to build Kôr shows the scientific & cultural advancement of its people, but to continue they must endure the "eternal curse which Nature lays on men & women

because she would not die," & suffer its "sweet madness" (Wisdom 139). However Haggard rejects the totally natural woman as poisonously unambitious. Ayesha ponders this difference between herself & Amenartes. Where she would spur Kallikrates on to new heights of intellectual inquiry, certain that his will only lacks a guide, Amenartes would divert him with passion, & the weighty affairs of everyday family life until he is helpless & docile (Wisdom 256). In this contrast we can see part of the allure of the femme fatale image for the Victorian male. The daring, challenging, dangerous woman fits well with youthful ambition & confidence, but as time wears down expectations, she turns into the domestic millstone of lost opportunity. The fault must be externalized, so the femme fatale becomes either evil or foolish where once she was divine & enlightened.

Haggard seeks a balance of Nature & Wisdom which will allow Man to continue to develop & expand his universe without succumbing to narcissistic self-destruction. Ultimately man must answer to himself for in Haggard's world the godhead is in each individual.

Certainly the saga of She centers upon its women. They are at once man's redeemer & destroyer & so qualify as femme fatales, but their image seems to transmute over the years between the four novels. In 1886 with *She*, we have the lady of "The Orchard Pit," seductively beautiful, cold, remorseless, & deadly. By 1904 in *Ayesha: The Return of She*, she has split into two, equally deadly reincarnations. Ayesha has become redemptive & offers salvation through love & sacrifice. Amenartes resurrects Salomé to add the flavor of the victim to the blend & a definite sense of feminine hatred for man. In 1921 in *She & Allan*, Ayesha loses some of her appearance of omnipotence as we discover her loneliness & that she is the victim of Fate. By 1923 in *Wisdom's Daughter*, we see her as deluded by her own vanity & at war with herself.

The simple, seemingly-instinctive male projection of the dangerous woman which we see in the original Ayesha has become a far more complex construct as the modern woman sheds some of her lustre in exchange for worldly wisdom, but still she remains an image born in the mind of man. Haggard seems to recognize that. Within the text, he repeatedly draws our attention to two sculptures which seem to capture that vision of Ayesha.

"The Mother" dominates the great hall of the Sanctuary. Holly describes it as the naked figure of a beautiful woman shrouded by her beating wings as she lifts the man-child away from some evil which has terrified him. As she lifts him towards the heavens, the firm, confident, yet alert look on her face calms & reassures the child (Ayesha 98). This maternal figure is of course herself a femme fatale in her invincible power & instinctive tenderness, that power of redemption & salvation which characterizes the comforting collaboration of the image of all women as mother to man.

The second sculpture appears in all four books. This is another winged woman standing on a globe & reaching forward. What is striking is that her perfect body is naked except for the veil which covers her face. In the inscription, she implores her children, the people of Kôr, to remove her veil & see the Truth beneath, but that is something they cannot do in this world. She is the Kôrian goddess of Truth who Ayesha says becomes Isis, the mother. Both are names only for the power of Nature which Haggard sees as the supreme power (She 214-215). But "The Mother" is

a pleasant fiction designed to reassure the religious faithful, a prop in the show built on expectation.

Each of the characters in the saga, except Amenartes & Kallikrates, are seekers after wisdom, just as Haggard is. All seek it in the captivating image of beauty, love & challenge which is the femme fatale. In it seems to be written the answer to all riddles, but we must remember that Haggard's powerful femme fatale is a self-serving, self-deluding liar. Her physical opposite, the foul, ugly dwarf-wizard Zikali, advises the frustrated Allan Quatermain that:

. . . they were very pretty lies, were they not? And after all I am sure that there was wisdom in them, as you will discover when you have thought them over for a score of years. Lies, lies, all is lies! But behind the lies stands Truth, as the White Witch stands behind her veil. You drew the veil & saw that beneath which brought you to your knees. Why it is a parable. Wander on through the Valley of Lies till at last it takes a turn &, glittering in the sunshine, glittering like gold, you perceive the Mountain of everlasting Truth, sought of all men but found by few. . . . fare you well, Seeker after Truth! (She & Allan 308)

Haggard spent some 37 years wandering this valley in search of Ayesha. By *Wisdom's Daughter* he seems to have concluded that Truth can only be found beyond the veil, but that did not stop him from creating an awe-inspiring creature of a fantasy we all recognize, even if we do not understand her or admit her face is ours.

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