

Male moral duty in king solomon's mines

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



King Solomon's Mines, in its first pages, poses the question, "What is a gentleman?" (10). Men and masculinity are at the novel's core. It is both for and about men, and consciously so: Haggard assures his readers that there is not a woman in the novel, or "at any rate... not a petticoat" (10). The feminine is either marginalized or simplified and employed only functionally to counterpoint the masculine. Critic Anne McClintock and I approach the novel differently: she uses the text historically and politically; I make no broad, external conclusions but focus directly on the preoccupations of Haggard's novel. Our essays are therefore fundamentally different, but not mutually exclusive. I have drawn out what is implicit in her writing to explain the novel holistically: a sense of male moral obligation pervades the novel and informs the way events and the actions of its characters are presented. King Solomon's Mines is an ode to male moral duty. It is the force that underlies the actions of those men the novel glorifies; a true "gentleman" is one who lives and dies by this moral code. In King Solomon's Mines, protection and benevolent alteration of the feminine are critical parts of the Englishmen's notion of male moral duty - this being indicative of their desire to control the feminine, McClintock suggests. She sees this preoccupation with guarding and reordering it on masculine terms as a form of male domination, a method by which the "paterfamilial restoration" (240) might be incurred. The Englishmen concern themselves with the feminine on two distinct planes, the broadest of which is Kakuanaland. This paradisaical, unspoiled Eden is itself a feminine entity: virginal, fertile, voluptuous. The physical landscape none too subtly recalls the female form: mountains marking the entrance to Kakuanaland are deemed "Sheba's Breasts", two

colossal forms “ perfectly round and smooth” (66) with a small hill atop each “ exactly corresponding to the nipple on the female breast” (66); past the mountains lies a fertile, bounteous midsection; and, a triumvirate of mountains – the “ Three Witches” – form a pubic triangle, within which are numerous dark, inscrutable caves (their relation to the female body being obvious). This landscape is evocative of woman not only in form, but in character – feminine character as perceived by Victorian men, at least: the land, though beautiful, is also vulnerable. It has fallen under the illegitimate control of Gagool and Twala. Good, Quatermain, Sir Henry, and some of the noblest of the Kakuana leaders are repulsed by the degradation of Kakuanaland by this injustice: “ The land cries out against Twala” (127), says Infadoos. The ensuing war for the Kakuana throne is tantamount to a symbolic righting of the corrupted feminine through masculine power – war. With the triumph of Ignosi, the Englishmen, the tribal chieftains and their armies, the land is purged of its former injustice. Foulata is another representation of the idealized feminine in Africa – a manifestation in many ways of Victorian feminine ideal; like Kakuanaland, she is also vulnerable. She is selected as a sacrifice to the Kakuana gods and will be killed if no intervention is made. The Englishmen’s “ cosmic sign,” their eclipse, simultaneously prevents Foulata’s death and proves to the Kakuana leaders their status as star deities, ensuring the leaders’ loyalty to Ignosi and setting the stage for a war for the Kakuana throne – and therefore a restoration of justice, a restoration of the corrupted feminine – will ensue. Their duty, however, extends beyond simply reinstating the just line of kingly succession in Kakuanaland. Quatermain, Good, and Sir Henry request that once Ignosi

claims his rightful place as king of Kakuanaland he implement certain preventative regulations; effectively, they call for law and order in the British style. Ignosi promises "to rule justly, to respect the law; and to put none to death without a cause" (222). Thus, through the intervention of the Englishmen and their protégé, Kakuanaland is purged of evil and safeguarded against further wrongs. McClintock reads this feminization of the land coupled with the Englishmen's reordering of it as evidence of patriarchal domination. My reading is a distillation of hers, an attempt to divorce it from its broad, historical perspective and find a more purely textual understanding. The feminine land is altered - the traditions of the land are changed once Ignosi takes the throne - because the protagonists feel that such changes are justified and that it is the noble vocation of a gentleman to lend his strength to rectify and protect the feminine. McClintock sees this, couples it with external data, and from there draws historical conclusions. However, her argument of paternal control exerted by the protagonists is related to my idea that their interest in reordering Kakuanaland is based on an instinctive duty to justice as they comprehend it. The differences in the arguments simply demonstrate our divergent approaches. However, the obligation of King Solomon's Mines' characters to one another - a man's duty to his brother, to his master, to his friend - is the crux of the novel's exploration of manhood. The characters' devotion is part of the canon of special male morality developed in the novel and exists in conjunction with (gentle)men's obligation to protect the vulnerable and combat injustice. The novel's central quest is predicated on Sir Henry's obligation to recover his brother, or at least honor him in an attempt. This

initial quest then, the quest that frames the novel and is only resolved in its last pages, sets the stage for the development of male bonds that will shape the novel. The Englishmen agree to participate intimately in a war against Twala in part because of an instinctual desire to preserve and cultivate justice, but explicitly because of their devotion to their friend Ignosi. The novel pays special attention to the war and the glory of the combatants as they display their masculine prowess, marveling at the beauty of men focusing their ability in the service of masculine virtues: love for their friend Ignosi in the case of the Englishmen and devotion to their leader Ignosi in the case of the soldiers. In 'An Elephant Hunt', a chapter seemingly detached from the bulk of the novel, Haggard provides a succinct exploration of a facet of the masculine dynamic that functions to illuminate the novel's wholesale designs. Khiva, an African serving the Englishmen on their journey, saves Captain Good from being trampled underfoot by an elephant, knowing full well that in doing so he will die. His death is the climactic moment of the chapter, its final words affirming Khiva's manhood, his gentlemanliness: "'Ah, well,' [Umbopa] said, presently, ' he is dead, but he died like a man'" (50). To be a man then is to submit oneself fully to the breadth of this male moral duty, the perfection of which for Khiva was death in his master's service. Foulata also dies protecting the Englishmen, yet her death is presented differently. She is stabbed by Gagool in a brief altercation: her death is not a conscious sacrifice, but a proof of her feminine weakness. Khiva is brutally wrenched apart by a colossal elephant while Foulata dies at the hand of a singular knife wound: hers is an unspectacular death, simply another event in their journey's catalog. Quatermain does not

see her death as terribly meaningful either, outside of its effect on Good and the fact that it prevents her from damaging the Englishmen's established rapport. The novel suggests that masculine moral code exists apart from the feminine, women's constitutions being too weak to bear its responsibilities. McClintock's argument makes little analytical use of the dynamics of the men's relationships with one another and none of Foulata or Khiva and the elephant hunt. Yet it is from her reading that mine evolved: in questioning her ideas on King Solomon's Mines' desire to vicariously and symbolically restore paternity, I discovered the thread of a unique male morality that shaped my arguments and my understanding of the novel's discourse on manhood. H. Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines glories in the triumphs of its men. The book is about the masculine and the idiosyncratic kind of moral obligation that is, at least in the world of the novel, inextricably tied to it. The novel is rife with insensitivity and anachronism in its portrayal of Africans and in its attitude toward women, yet these facts are outside of the purview of the essay. The novel is a Victorian fantasy, after all; its understanding of manhood is, indeed, as anachronistic and offensive.