Taming the Goddess:
Managing male fear and desire in late Victorian England:  
*Astarte Syriaca* (1877) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and  
*She* (1887) by H. Rider Haggard

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Fear and sexual desire have often gone hand in hand, but Victorian men were particularly prone to the affliction. Each of these artists, one a painter and poet, the other a novelist, used his chosen medium to offer himself and his public the means to deal with these troubling emotions. Marked contrasts in approach arise from differences of personality and artistic choice, one celebrating the cult of beauty, the other taking refuge in misogyny; yet a number of parallels also emerge from this comparative examination of the two artefacts and their creators’ biographical background.

The fear and desire felt by men towards women were significantly affected in late Victorian times by the far-reaching changes taking place in English society, and the implications of these for women’s status. The sacramental rigidity of the institution of marriage was challenged by the Matrimonial Causes Act, 1857, which shifted jurisdiction from the ecclesiastical to the civil courts, thus rendering the path to divorce less obscure and a little more affordable. Later, the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 gave married women independent control over their personal property, which had previously reverted to their husbands. The exponential growth of industry and commerce offered women greater employment opportunities, while some sought to enter higher education and gain universal suffrage. This gradual departure from the ‘Angel in the House’ model of docile female domesticity, combined with a Europe-wide economic depression in the late 1870s, led to hostility amongst many men who held patriarchal views, and so began to see women as a potential threat to both their social status and their masculinity.¹

Two male artists of the period, one a painter and poet, the other a novelist, manifested and confronted their fears and desires (and those of their public) in their portrayals of a ‘goddess’ figure. Their backgrounds, motivations, methods and output were very different; yet there are some shared characteristics of these two artefacts that serve to enhance our understanding of their creators’ mindsets.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in its day a movement often ‘dismissed as naïve, over-sexualized, immoral and, most damningly, “unmanly”’ (in this respect it is the antithesis of H. Rider Haggard’s She, the kind of adventure romance where manliness was de rigueur).\(^2\) *Astarte Syriaca* (figure 1) came late in Rossetti’s career, only five years before his death in 1882. By the 1870s, Jane Burden Morris, his model for the painting, had become the iconic face of his artwork, with her tall figure, long nose and neck, pursed lips, thick dark hair, and dreamy, otherworldly look. The complex triangular relationship with Jane and her husband William Morris informed this late strand of Rossetti’s work. An accompanying sonnet guides the reader through a viewing of the picture.\(^3\) Bryan Gast sees Astarte’s pose as largely inspired by Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*.\(^4\) While it is true that her ‘twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon | Of bliss’, the

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\(^3\) See Appendix: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Astarte Syriaca, For a Picture’ (1877).

hands similarly delineating the area between her breasts and pudenda, the elegance and charm of Botticelli’s version are transformed by Rossetti into a more sombre and imposing version of the Love goddess.\(^5\) Her face looks straight out in front, but the gaze appears unfocused and thereby inscrutable. The sonnet’s first and last words are ‘mystery’, yet the painting invites the viewer to probe more deeply.\(^6\)

*She* also presents its reader with a ‘mystery’ (the word occurs twelve times in the novel), but, as befits this different medium, its effect here is to enhance the narrative tension. The setting is Africa: Haggard had been persuaded to seek a more promising future (and break a romantic liaison of which his father disapproved) by going to work for the imperial bureaucracy in Natal. The novel’s narrative frame contains pseudo-archaic artefacts, which serve as ‘evidence’ persuading the narrator, Horace Holly, and his adopted son to undertake a perilous journey to central Africa to avenge the murder, some two thousand years previously, of the son’s ancestor Kallikrates. The culprit is the beautiful white demigoddess known as ‘She-who-must-be-obeyed’ or Ayesha, who appears to have discovered the secret of eternal life and still rules over

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\(^5\) ‘Astarte Syriaca’, ll. 4–5.

\(^6\) ‘Astarte Syriaca’, ll. 1 and 14.
a native tribe from within the bowels of a mountain. Holly, despite his overall ‘manly’ resilience, confesses his fear when first admitted into the queen’s presence (‘I was frightened, I do not know why’); indeed, in the first few pages of the novel he is described by the ‘editor’ as ‘popularly supposed to be as much afraid of a woman as most people are of a mad dog’.7 8 Desire, too, is evident. When Ayesha unveils, Holly confesses: ‘I could bear it no longer. [...] I would give my immortal soul to marry her.’9

Before examining in more detail the nature of these fears and desires and how they are to be managed, I would like to consider some further parallels between the two artefacts, and an interest that both artists shared. In his sonnet Rossetti stresses the eternal essence of his goddess of Love by giving her an elemental setting in space that precedes even the most ancient of Western mythologies: ‘betwixt the sun and moon | Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen | Ere Aphrodite was’.10 In She, Holly refers to Ayesha’s ‘air of sublimated coquetry that would have done credit to a Venus Victrix’, and her mood is later described as ‘that of Aphrodite triumphing’.11 12 Her ‘visible majesty’, ‘imperial grace’, and ‘godlike stamp of softened power’ are all epithets that could equally apply to Astarte.13 Furthermore, Ayesha is intrigued by Holly’s ability to speak Arabic, which she calls ‘an ancient tongue, that sweet child of the old Syriac’.14 Linguistic history is thereby superimposed on divine myth since, as Robert Louis Wilken has noted, Latin, Greek, and Syriac were the three most important Christian languages in the early centuries.15 Haggard’s female protagonist, ancient and otherworldly though she must be, is thus rendered more plausible to his novel’s readers as a ‘real woman’. Rossetti, whose model was a real woman, uses mythology to temper the painful reality of a deeply unhappy history of sexual relationships. As J. B. Bullen observes, ‘the mask of legend was an enabling factor which served to inscribe the problem of libido in another culture, and enabled Rossetti to examine the issue of the transgressive female with an equanimity which [he] was unable to achieve in the contemporary realist mode.’16 The statement could equally apply to She.

The aforementioned shared interest was spiritualism, which had been enormously popular in Britain since the arrival of Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1853. She had lost her son and in trying to contact him in the afterlife had attracted the attention

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8 Haggard, She, p. 12.
9 Haggard, She, p. 172.
10 ‘Astarte Syriaca’, ll. 2–3.
11 Haggard, She, p. 144.
12 Haggard, She, p. 172.
13 Haggard, She, p. 143.
14 Haggard, She, p. 132.
of a large section of British society, including Queen Victoria. In Rossetti’s case it was his wife’s death in 1862 that had left him devastated by grief and guilt, and he frequently claimed to be in contact with her during séances. This obsession persisted throughout his work on Astarte: as his brother William Michael recalls, ‘In November 1879 I found that his mind was much occupied with spiritualism, and that he was then fully convinced, or re-convinced, of immortality.’ With its pseudo-scientific associations, spiritualism spoke to ‘the increasing concern of Victorian religion with the inwardness of religious experience’, while seeking to harness the new science of the age to a purpose that circumvented the harshly materialist aspects of the technological revolution. It helped support Rossetti’s belief in immortality, as manifested in ‘Love’s all-penetrative spell’, which transcends time and space and, as we shall see, offered him a way to ‘tame’ his ‘goddess’. Haggard writes of his experience of spiritualism in his autobiography. After describing some of the more bizarre events he has witnessed, he decides that ‘the whole business is mischievous and to be discouraged’. Nonetheless, he later makes a more serious claim: ‘By scientific experience I have myself become absolutely convinced of persistence of existence, and I regard death as an important episode—the reverse of birth—but neither of these episodes really initial or final.’ This adds a touch of personal conviction to the plot of She, where Ayesha’s avenger-turned-lover Leo appears to be the reincarnation of his ancestor, and whereby at the end of the novel the door is left open to an eventual return of Ayesha herself.

She shares many features with King Solomon’s Mines, its predecessor by two years: an African setting, a quest for a fantastic goal, and a largely male cast. That novel’s dedication – ‘To all the big and little boys who read it’ – could equally apply to She, and, as the congratulatory messages quoted in Haggard’s autobiography attest, some of the ‘boys’ were very big indeed! One must assume that many of these male readers of She not only found excitement in the novel’s breathtaking succession of near escapes, but also felt a sense of solidarity with the profound misogyny that permeates the dialogue. When we first meet the narrator he is cocooned in his all-male college ‘[i]n

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20 ‘Astarte Syriaca’, l. 12.
22 Haggard, The Days of my Life, Chapter 19.
24 Haggard, The Days of my Life, Chapter 10.
the Clubland environment of Victorian Cambridge’. Like the narrator of King Solomon’s Mines he could claim (with only a few exceptions, notably the eponymous character): ‘there is not a petticoat in the whole history.’ That such a claim is made at all amply illustrates the perceived ‘otherness’ of and even disdain for women in this fictional world. It also provides an opportunity to draw another parallel and note an additional contrast with the world of Rossetti.

The domination of men by women is posited, then played with in both works, and is finally ridiculed in She. In her introduction to a collection of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, Dinah Roe notes that ‘Pre-Raphaelitism, based as it was on social networking and a dining-club atmosphere, was an almost exclusively male movement’. This seems to correspond entirely to the narrative frame of She. However, Roe then refers to the movement’s ‘near-obsession with the portrayal of women’, and to the fact that it ‘maintained strict demarcations between women’s roles (as muses) and men’s (as creators)’. Both Astarte and Ayesha are objects of fear and desire, but Rossetti sublimates these emotions by drawing aesthetic inspiration from his ‘muse’, not a term that could readily apply to Ayesha. Haggard is more concerned with male characters, and his narrator confronts the fear generated by women on two levels: as a male with romantic insecurities, and as a man with the imperial mission of shoulderong the infamous ‘White Man’s Burden’. On one level, Holly, tasked by his dying widowed friend with adopting his son Leo, achieves a kind of ‘virgin fatherhood, paternity without the need for contaminating intercourse with women’. He is also at pains to hire a male attendant for his adopted son: ‘I would have no woman to lord it over me about the child, and steal his affections from me.’ Later, on another level, he decides that disdain is the appropriate reaction for someone of his status and all it represents: ‘I was an Englishman, and why, I asked myself, should I creep into the presence of some savage woman as though I were a monkey. […] It would be a patent acknowledgment of inferiority.’ Ayesha is safely located in darkest Africa, posing little threat to the ‘civilized’ world. However, when she suggests returning with Leo to overthrow the other Great White Queen in London, Holly’s dismay is palpable: ‘it made me absolutely shudder to think what would be the result of her arrival [in England].’ Elaine Showalter writes, ‘Even while the age of imperialism was at its height, there were also fears of degeneration and collapse.’ She quotes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: ‘To many late nineteenth […] century men, women seemed to be agents of an alien

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25 Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy, Gender and Culture at the ‘Fin de Siècle’ (London: Virago Press, 2010), p. 84.
26 Haggard, King Solomon’s Mines, p. 9.
27 Roe, pp. xxxii–xxxiii.
28 Showalter, p. 84.
29 Haggard, She, p. 26.
30 Haggard, She, p. 130.
31 Haggard, She, p. 226.
32 Showalter, p. 4.
Holly’s reaction would doubtless have been shared by many of Haggard’s readers. Indeed, the frisson (with sexual overtones) of imminent doom and near escape pervades the novel. Ayesha is after all not ‘a savage woman’, but a demigoddess to be worshipped, and any defiance must be fraught with danger. In a chapter entitled ‘Speculations’ we learn from Billali, a lieutenant of Ayesha, that ‘in this country the women do as they please. […] Without them the world could not go on; they are the source of life.’ This sounds like an excursion into the nature of a matriarchal society; indeed, there has already been a scene where native women tease the protagonists (and, by extension, the reader) with unsolicited sexual advances. However, it soon becomes evident that this system only applies ‘up to a certain point, till at last they get unbearable’, after which, says Billali, ‘we rise, and kill the old ones as an example to the young ones, and to show them that we are the strongest.’

So much for the matriarchy.

As we have seen, fear and desire complement each other in this novel. Indeed, in his history of the Victorian age, A. N. Wilson quotes V. S. Pritchett on She: ‘Haggard installed a suction pump. He drained the whole reservoir of the public’s desires.’ The imagery of male fantasy is unmistakable. Holly and Leo are carried on litters through boggy terrain until they penetrate the ‘Caves of Kôr’. Much time is spent in dark womb-like passages, and the final self-destruction of Ayesha is achieved in a phallic ‘pillar of fire’. The whole story is something of a Freudian nightmare (Haggard and Freud were exact contemporaries). Indeed, Showalter recounts how Freud described his own ‘Haggardesque’ dream, and argues that ‘the mysterious and boggy landscape Freud traverses is his own body and psyche and […] the male self, too, can be the site of uncertainty and fear.’ Holly roundly condemns desire: ‘Curses on the fatal curiosity that is ever prompting man to draw the veil from woman, and curses on the natural impulse that begets it! It is the cause of […] more than half […] of our misfortunes.’ Ayesha is seen as the embodiment of evil. The phallic image of a snake is used more than a dozen times to describe some part of her apparel, her movement or her voice, implicitly projecting male fear and desire on to the female. Yet for Holly, Ayesha is simply the most powerful personification of the evil inherent in all women: he fears for Leo, who ‘would place his life under the influence of a mysterious creature of evil tendencies, but then that would be likely in any ordinary marriage’ (my italics). The goddess must be tamed; and the task turns out to be easier than feared, since, in her hubristic belief that she is immune, Ayesha enters the ‘pillar of fire’ and perishes. As Vance observes: ‘Ayesha represents quite precisely “the world’s desire”’ [the title of a later novel co-written by Haggard] ‘[…] but she is subject to eternal law for the better government

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33 Showalter, p. 7.
34 Haggard, She, p. 107.
36 Showalter, p. 138.
37 Haggard, She, p. 147.
38 Haggard, She, p. 215.
of the world. [...] Rider Haggard manipulates myth as a moralist. Indeed, once she is safely out of the way – not just killed, but reduced to the most abject humiliation of ‘a hideous little monkey frame’ – Holly can afford to indulge himself and his readers by admitting that there was something exciting about the ‘evil’ of this woman: ‘her wickedness had not detracted from her charm. Indeed, I am by no means certain that it did not add to it.’

This is a reassuring message for Haggard’s male readers: Ayesha may be ‘evil’, but she has never really posed a threat to the status quo because her fallibility has already condemned her. In this fictional world desire may be considered a curse, but fear turns out to be unnecessary.

Despite the overtly misogynist tone of She, there is at least one episode that enables us to forge a link back to the more ethereal experience of Astarte Syriaca. Not long before she dies, Ayesha asserts that it is ‘love which makes all things beautiful, and doth breathe divinity into the very dust we tread’. According to John Holmes, ‘Rossetti elevates bodily love to the level of the divine.’ Astarte is one of his most successful demonstrations of that achievement. As previously noted, her figure is imposing with its strong arms and shoulders, perhaps inspiring fear as she seems to move forward, hands poised to unveil: she is after all a goddess. J. B. Bullen calls her ‘the personification of desire, neither condemned nor reviled, but figured as a powerful and integral part of the human condition’. Yet both fear and desire are managed by the sense that there is also a spiritual dimension to which the viewer may submit: this is ‘bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune’. ‘Astarte’s “[l]ove-freighted lips” are allied with her “absolute eyes that wean” the erratic pulse of earth-bound hearts to the celestial “spheres’ dominant tune” of love.’

By the unusual deployment of the phrase ‘wean to’ (rather than ‘from’) Rossetti seduces the male reader into replacing deprivation (usually associated with weaning) with spiritual as well as physical desire for the goddess. Thus, ‘Astarte’s solemn, penetrating gaze matches in spirituality the fleshliness of the lips.’ Significantly, Rossetti chose only to inscribe the sestet of his sonnet on the frame of the picture. By viewing the painting we are invited into the gaze, and, as previously suggested, are captivated by its inscrutable mystery. But in the sestet the poet urges us to follow the two ‘compelling’ acolytes as they (and we) gaze heavenwards before descending once again to focus on ‘[t]hat face’, paragon of ‘Beauty’, and, as ‘[a]mulet, talisman and oracle’, a magical catalyst for ‘Love’s all-

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39 Vance, p. 179.
40 Haggard, She, p. 258.
41 Haggard, She, p. 261.
42 Haggard, She, p. 222.
44 Bullen, Rossetti: Painter and Poet, p. 245.
45 ‘Astarte Syriaca’, l. 5.
46 ‘Astarte Syriaca’, ll. 7–8.
48 Agosta, p. 94.
penetrative spell’, which is the very crux of the meaning that the poem imposes on the painting.49

Both artists were proud of their work. Rossetti’s brother wrote: ‘[Dante Gabriel] considered [the painting] (not without fair grounds) nearly or quite the best; […] [O]f all his productions, it was the greatest money-success [selling for £2100].’50 She’s popularity was staggering. In the first few months after publication it had sold over thirty thousand copies, and Haggard wrote that when he had finished the manuscript he threw it on his literary agent’s table with the words, ‘There is what I shall be remembered by.’51 52 Rossetti and Haggard both clearly felt they had an important message to express, not only vis-à-vis their public, but also, I think, as an exercise in self-therapy. The art historian Griselda Pollock sees Astarte as ‘a figure before which the masculine viewer can comfortably stand subjected’.53 It depicts a coming to terms with fear and desire through voluntary obeisance to the cult of feminine beauty, a projection, according to Jung, of the “anima”, the unacknowledged feminine presence within every man’.54 Such a reverential approach to ‘taming the goddess’ appears to have little in common with the misogyny of Haggard’s adventure romance. Yet She was regarded by Jung as ‘the clearest literary example of the “anima” figure of the unconscious’.55 Penned by a successful family man whose social esteem was on the rise, She does not make for the most obvious pairing with the poem or the painting Astarte Syriaca, the work of a lonely aesthete, a prey to illicit desire and a chloral addict. Yet it was the fear and desire inspired by women that drove each man to deploy his particular talent in managing the deep-seated insecurities that marked the changing times in which he lived.

49 ‘Astarte Syriaca’, l. 9 and ll. 11–13.
50 William Michael Rossetti, p. 363.
51 Showalter, p. 87.
52 Haggard, The Days of my Life, Chapter 10.
54 Vance, p. 173.
55 Vance, p. 179.
Appendix

Astarte Syriaca
(For a Picture)

Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and the moon
Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen
Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
Of bliss whereof 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.56

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Astarte Syriaca, 1877, oil on canvas, 185 × 109 cm, Manchester Art Gallery. Image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery

Figure 2: Cover of She, 3rd edition, 1891, London. Courtesy of British Library, shelfmark 012618.h.12

Figure 3: Ayesha unveils, illustration by Maurice Greiffenhagen for She, 3rd edition, 1891, London. Courtesy of British Library, shelfmark 012618.h.12.

56 Roe, p. 115.
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