

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Allin, Leslie, *Penetrating Critiques: Emasculated Empire and Victorian Identity in Africa*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 320 pp.

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<1>Why, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, at a period when Britain was allegedly at the height of its imperial power, did literary and cultural texts of empire, instead of celebrating British masculine prowess, register masculinity as a site of anxiety and failure? Leslie Allin's *Penetrating Critiques: Emasculated Empire and Victorian Identity in Africa* answers this question at the level of discourse and makes a well-argued and compelling contribution to debates about the techniques through which empire was written in the period after the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War.

<2>Allin's rich and substantive study adeptly juxtaposes fiction, such as H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), with archival sources, such as newspaper reports of British defeats by Zulu warriors in Southern Africa. What ties the historical and literary together is the fact that both historical and fictional works are "acts of writing that attempted to capture, however tenuously, complex intercultural encounters in colonial spaces" (6). Such acts of writing are precarious, however, because the imperialist fantasies that structure such writings rest on the fact that "the relationships between bodies, spaces, and texts are profoundly co-legitimizing, and thus co-dependent" (7). Because of this co-legitimacy and co-dependency among conceptions of bodies, spaces, and texts, instability in one of these three elements produces instability in the others. The word *penetrating* of Allin's title gestures towards the nature of this instability: Allin contends that the coherence, power, and strength of texts, male bodies, and spaces depend on their impermeability, their fortified boundaries. The texts that represent the British imperial presence in Africa, while they often strive to render a seamless fantasy of masculine imperial power, tend to register their own permeability, along with the permeability of bodies and spaces. The texts of empire become testimonies to the intertwined failed projects of empire and of masculinity.

<3>*Penetrating Critiques* is divided into three parts based on three different British imperial ventures in Africa. The first part considers, side by side, journalistic representations of the Anglo-Zulu War and Haggard's most successful romances set in Africa, *King Solomon's Mines* and *She* (1886/1887). The second part juxtaposes the diaries of General Charles Gordon from the siege of Khartoum with Richard Marsh's 1897 Gothic horror novel, *The Beetle*, which concerns a shapeshifting mummy that runs amok in late-Victorian London. The final part of the book aligns a lesser-known stage of British imperial history, Britain's attempts to control the "particularly elusive indigenous secret society known as the Human Leopards" in Sierra Leone (156), most notably during the 1890s, with Joseph Conrad's depiction of the failure of masculinity and narrative legitimacy in the Congo, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Though the alignment between the archival documents and the fiction is strongest in the first part of the book and the most tenuous in the third part, the counterpoint between archival and imaginative texts enables a compelling exploration both of the manifold functions of writing the imperial frontier and of the ways that efforts to police the boundaries of empire and strengthen the boundaries of the male body are ultimately failures.

<4>Allin's readings of imperial fiction are most exciting when she goes against the critical consensus, and this side of her argument comes into the greatest relief when she discusses Haggard's fiction. She writes, "Without ignoring *King Solomon's Mines*' participation in discourses of racism and misogyny, we can acknowledge its historically specific critique of extant practices of imperial masculinity, and that it is a much more complex text than criticism has acknowledged" (76). In her analysis of *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, Allin compares these texts with adventure stories by G. A. Henty and R. M. Ballantyne and observes that *King Solomon's Mines* both celebrates and parodies the genre of imperial romance, in part through the unreliable narration of Allan Quatermain. Quatermain claims that he will tell his story in a plain, unadorned style, but, as Allin details, Quatermain proceeds by making statements challenged by the text's editor. He dabbles in elaborate, flowery prose when describing the African landscape, he eroticizes male characters, and this last aspect of the narrative "parodies dominant codes of manliness in adventure fiction and imperial ideology more broadly" (67). The parody in Haggard's first imperial romance is, however, far from anti-imperial, despite the co-legitimizing of the male body and British empire that is part of Allin's argument. Instead, parody makes possible imperial fantasy's "symptomatic diagnosis and repair" in *King Solomon's Mines* (77). When Allin turns to *She*, the parody is more extreme, and Allin stresses a point that has been made before, though not in relation to parody, that "Ayesha herself reflects the dominant image of British imperialist masculine extremes back to the readership" (87). *She* undermines the masculine ability to write the empire

and, in comparison with *King Solomon's Mines*, provides even less assurance that the failed masculine subject can be repaired.

<5>Yet moving from discussions of specific texts to the overarching argument of the book, there is a larger concern that emerges in *Penetrating Critiques*: the question of whether the potential delegitimation of discourses of empire and masculinity that Allin describes is different from written discourse's widespread openness to delegitimation. The claims that "imperial writing functions to eat itself from the inside out" and that "the very inscription of strength can shade into profound weakness" are indeed persuasive when we consider texts such as Conrad's profoundly ironic *Heart of Darkness* and Marsh's frenzied narrative of reverse colonization, *The Beetle*, but *Penetrating Critiques* could benefit from more counterexamples of texts that, like those of Henty and Ballantyne, don't fail to legitimate themselves (15). In what specific instances is the fantasy of impenetrable imperial masculinity seamless? Such counterexamples would prevent *Penetrating Critiques* from at times appearing to address all discourse rather than the specific British imperial discourses about Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Allin contends both that authors deploy auto-critique and that auto-critique is also a pervasive "narrative mode" (15), and thus provokes the question of whether it is possible to limit auto-critique's pervasiveness as an author, or whether auto-critique is a necessary part of all discourse.

<6>Although the book is especially useful in highlighting the contradictions and failures of masculinity and imperial discourse within literary texts as well as in journalism, the study flirts with ignoring the historical contingencies of the nineteenth century to overemphasize the power of discourse when discussing non-journalistic archival sources. When analyzing journalism that recounts events of the Anglo-Zulu War in Chapter One, Allin succeeds in demonstrating that the *Daily Telegraph*, *Northern Echo*, and *Hereford Times* highlighted how British soldiers dishonored themselves in their violent reprisals against the Zulus near the end of the war. In the next part of the monograph, Allin argues that the Gothic is the genre of crisis, "rife" with "oppressive shame" that easily maps on to British newspapers' attempts to process and report on Gordon's demise at Khartoum (115). Here her study complements the work of previous scholars who have examined the genres and modes of imperial crisis, such as Christopher Herbert in his examination of "the literature of horror" that emerged after the events of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion (Herbert 25). Allin makes a compelling connection between the historical events she describes and those of the Sepoy Rebellion, while also acknowledging that few Victorian Britons understood African cultures and landscapes in comparison with the number who understood the people and places of the Indian subcontinent.

<7>Allin's argument becomes more tenuous when it turns to Gordon's journals. The discussion of Gordon's situation at Khartoum is consistent with John Peck's description of the pattern of the colonial siege during the Victorian period, in which the British are portrayed as "defending civilized life as it meets a challenge from an uncivilised enemy" (Peck 165), yet Allin's analysis of Gordon's journals forces the reader to question the different techniques we should deploy in discussing this intriguing nexus of writing, empire, masculinity, and the body in non-fiction texts as opposed to fiction. When reading Gordon's journals alongside a *Pall Mall Gazette* map titled "Khartoum under siege" and emphasizing Gordon's reference to the Mahdi's approaching forces as a "gathering of waters" (111), Allin contends that the "aqueous boundary line" of the fort at Khartoum "resonates" with the idea that "forces that threatened the body's boundaries with dissolution are pervasively conceptualized as fluid" (111). There is indeed a resonance here and one could, perhaps, imagine Gordon making such a subconscious connection, but the relationship of the real geography of Khartoum—the fort's exposure on the Nile—with the threatened dissolution of the human body seems somewhat too resonant, like a map in a Haggard novel. One could relate *gathering of waters* to language about divine creation in the Bible, but the notion that the water around Khartoum is "symbolically dangerous" because, in conversation with Laura Otis's research on membranes, "the rivers themselves constituted the quite literally fluid membrane of the fort" seems less a claim about Gordon and more an overall statement about the landscape (110). Similarly, statements about the material organization of Gordon's journals themselves as embodiments of instability risk reading contingent material circumstances as symbols.

<8>Yet this potential to overread the physical world is also suggestive of the richness of Allin's study. *Penetrating Critiques* is impressive in its imaginative range and its ability to connect the nuances of journalism, fiction, and archival materials into a larger argument about the difficulty to writing masculinity and writing the British Empire. Parodic and ironic literary texts here mirror a sense that British officials and military personnel were partially aware of the flimsiness of their imperialist justifications for their military campaigns and government policies. If only the undermined rhetorical legitimacy described by Allin had made a greater impact on the toxic global effects of the British Empire.

## Works Cited

Herbert, Christopher. *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

Peck, John. *War, the Army and Victorian Literature*. Palgrave, 1998.