December 1986

She and The Moral Dilemma of Elizabeth Bowen

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 22, no.4, December 1986, p.205-214
IN 1947 the BBC Third Programme asked a succession of novelists to talk about the book (or books) that had most affected them in their formative years. Elizabeth Bowen chose to speak about She, a novel by Rider Haggard that she read at the age of twelve. At that time Bowen felt “bored and hampered” by life. She had “exhausted the myths of childhood,” having developed in the course of her education “a sort of grudge against actuality.” The historical novel proved superior to the history of actual events. She was “depressed” then “by what seemed the sheer uniformity of the human lot, by its feebleness, arising from some deficiency . . .” (“She” 230). What Bowen encountered in She changed her outlook radically.

Bowen summarizes the opening of the novel in this way:

Horace Holly, forty, a Cambridge don, looks ferocious like a baboon, but is mild at heart. Holly’s ward, Leo Vincey, has gold curls and looks like a Greek god. Leo’s twenty-fifth birthday is to be marked by the ceremonial opening of a family casket; it is revealed that the Vinceys, good old stock, trace descent from one Kallikrates, a priest of Isis. This Kallikrates broke his vows to marry, fled to Egypt, was shipwrecked on the Libyan coast, encountered the white queen of a savage tribe, and was by her slain—having failed to return her love for the good reason that he was married already. The vindictive queen, it remained on record, had bathed in the Fire of Everlasting Life. (231)

Leo, it turns out, is the reborn Kallikrates and “She-who-must-be-obeyed” takes up with him where she left off (two thousand years ago) with his ancestor. The plan is clear: marriage to Leo, return to England and “absolute rule over the British dominions, and probably the whole world . . .” (235).

All the while, Holly, who is both the narrator and the conscience of the book, is tormented in his sleep by the cry that “Imperial Kôr is fallen, fallen!” (232). This is the lost city of the entombed queen, unseen for thousands of years while She awaits the return of her lover and the application of her powers. Holly compares Kôr to London indirectly; Bowen does so directly. Having “seen” Kôr before London, Bowen could not help but be “disappointed” by the English capital: “I was inclined to see London as Kôr with the roofs still on” (234).

1. Graham Greene also chose Rider Haggard, but agreed to discuss King Solomon’s Mines to leave She to Bowen.
Bowen “read She, dreamed She, lived She for a year and a half” and later in 1947 discovered that though she had not seen the book since her youth, “surprisingly little of what was written [in the novel] has evaporated” (236). What accounts for the powerful impression this Edwardian novel had on Bowen? It was not, she insists, empathy for the strong female so different from the Anglo-Irish ideal. Bowen’s denial of identification betrays, however, an appreciation of this woman whose strength and power was all but absolute:

Did I then, I must ask, myself aspire to “She’s” role? I honestly cannot say so. “She” was she—the out-size absolute of the grown-up. The exaltation I wanted was to be had from the looking on. She had entered the fire (the thing of which I was most frightened). She shocked me, as agreeably and profoundly as she shocked Horace Holly. For me, she continued to have no face—I saw her as I preferred her, veiled, veiled; two eyes burning their way through layers of gauze. Horace Holly’s chaste categoric descriptions of anything further left me cold. The undulating form (even her neck, he told me, undulated at times), the scented raven hair, the rounded arm, the “tiny sandalled foot,” she could—where I was concerned—keep.

The book is for Bowen an “historical” moment, since “it stands for the first totally violent impact I ever received from print. After She, print was to fill me with apprehension. I was prepared to handle any book like a bomb” (236). It was not the woman that attracted her, she claims, but the man Holly, the writer. It was Holly “not ever, really, She-who-must-be-obeyed, who controlled the magic” (236). It was the “power of the pen . . . the inventive pen” that was the revelation, the “power in the cave” (236). Though it is the writer’s power that Bowen acknowledged openly, the image of the female capable of a power beyond moral control would not be forgotten. It would return in her work in various guises; but like She, it would be always “veiled, veiled.”

The true impact of this book on Elizabeth Bowen the writer is easier to assess when her description of it is placed against her discussion of the position of literature in modern life, especially in her reviews of her contemporaries. In a remarkable review of Elders and Betters by Ivy Compton-Burnett in 1944, we see that her reaction to She was quite different from her assessment of the contribution of the Edwardian novel as a whole. It is here too that we can see that the attraction of Rider Haggard’s novel is not in the release from real life that it afforded, but in its exploration, however shocking and sentimental, of a moral dilemma that runs to the heart of a problem central to a woman’s place in modern English society.

In an attempt to place the achievement of Compton-Burnett within the history of the English novel, Bowen distinguishes the Victorian from the Edwardian task. The Victorian age, she explains, ended “a decade or two before its nominal close”; thereafter “the subject changed” (“Ivy” 85). With the early 1900s came “a perceptible lightening, if a decrease in innocence: the Edwardian novelists were more frivolous, more pathetic”
(85). Their art "was an effort to hush things up" (86). What they tried to silence was the "task the Victorians failed to finish": a "survey of emotion as an aggressive force, an account of the battle for power that goes on in every unit of English middle-class life" (86). The Victorian interest in "realism and thoroughness" is "underrated" precisely because they "concentrated on power and its symbols—property, God, the family" (87). Because of this, with the exception of Thackeray, they dealt with the clearest perception of that power: the world of the child. Thus we are, in the Victorian novel, "in a world of dreadfully empowered children. The rule of the seniors only is not questioned because, so visibly, they can enforce it. . . ." The child merely watches and waits his "turn for power" (87).

What is most interesting is Bowen's insistence on the feminine nature of the Victorian period:

In its subjectivity, in its obsession with emotional power, the age was feminine: the assertions by the male of his masculinity, the propaganda for "manliness" go to show it. The apron-string, so loudly denounced, was sought, and family life, through being ostensibly patriarchal, was able to cover much. (88)

From this, quite naturally as Bowen sees it, the "Edwardians took fright and sought refuge in the society fairy tale." The result has not been a happy one for English fiction:

As it happened, the Victorians were interrupted: death hustled them, one by one, from the room. We may only now realize that these exits, and, still more; the nervous change of subject that followed them, were a set-back for the genuine English novel. Its continuity seems to be broken up. Since then, we have a few brilliant phenomena, but, on the whole, a succession of false starts. (88)

Bowen sees in Elders and Betters evidence of a serious novelist able at last to pick up where the Victorians left off.

The attraction of She, therefore, is what set it apart from its Edwardian neighbors: its insistence on feminine power and the capacity of the word to reveal it. One of the "ideas" that Bowen realized from Haggard's novel was that the writer could not only lift the veil, but also "control the magic" embedded in the fabric of English social life. In this way the Victorian "survey of the English psychological scene" (85) could be allowed to proceed in order, as Elders and Betters illustrated, to keep a "course parallel with our modern experience" (91). It is this course, distinctly feminine and unusually concerned with the "aggressive force" elemental to English society, that is most remarkable in Bowen's own work. This is especially true of the short story, Bowen's preferred form, a form chosen not simply on aesthetic but also on moral grounds. In her introduction to The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories, Bowen declares that the short form allows for a degree of morality impossible in the novel:

The art of the short story permits a break at what in the novel would be the crux of the plot: the short story, free from the longueurs of the novel is also exempt from the novel's
This emphasis on "moral truth" links in a dramatic way the world of Haggard's *She* and the feminine creatures that populate Bowen's own universe. In numerous stories female ghosts, both real and imagined, break in on "real" events to reveal the unbearable moral vacuum of modern life. In other stories the lessons of *She* are more directly revealed as we observe a series of women who participate, in various disguises, in the power of "She-who-must-be-obeyed." There the urge to overcome the "feebleness, arising from some deficiency" in life leads Bowen's powerful females in one of two directions: toward an amoral, albeit futile, manipulation of circumstance, or toward an equally unacceptable flight from grim reality. In either case, however, the men are seldom better than Leo Vincey, the golden-haired male prototype of Haggard's novel; they are usually tolerated and sometimes loved, not from an appreciation of their value, but from an acknowledgement of their necessity. This is, essentially, what the "Editor" of *She* himself admits when he confesses that there "appeared to be nothing in the character of Leo Vincey which . . . would have been likely to attract an intellect so powerful as that of Ayesha. He is not even, at any rate to my view, particularly interesting . . ." (*She* 21). He further speculates that either She ("Ayesha") saw some well-hidden kernel of nobility in the recesses of Leo's soul or "that the very excess and splendour of her mind led her by means of some strange physical reaction to worship at the shrine of matter" (21-22). Leo, possessed of beauty only, stirs the moral and physical power of She. At their best, men in Bowen's stories rarely do as well.

In "The Disinherited," for example, the strong female protagonist, Davina Archworth, is not delayed by moral scruples or confused by particular ambition. She is introduced in an autumnal scene of decay, where "everything rotted slowly" (375). Davina is first seen occupying with her aunt a house that "had a high, narrow face, with dark inanimate windows and looked like the frontispiece to a ghost-story" (377). What follows is a ghost story of a sort, complete with a corruptible damsel (Marianne Harvey), an insane and murderous domestic (Prothero), and a powerful though distinctly less-than-divine protagonist (Davina). Miss Archworth, we soon learn, is living off her aunt after squandering her own considerable fortune waiting for "something" to happen:

In an agony of impatience, she waited about indefinitely. Something that should have occurred—she was not sure what—had not occurred yet, and became every day more unlikely. She remained, angry, immobile, regretting that circumstances over which she had had really, at one time, every control, should have driven her into exploiting her aunt's affection. (377)

Davina's power over her aunt makes victory "too easy." In this she is much like her dead uncle "who, melancholy and dashing, had hung up his
hat in this house with a gracious despondent gesture and had been loved to distraction by his dull, pink wife throughout the years of their marriage, in return for which he had given her scarcely a smile” (377). Like Haggard's She, an unapproachable mien contributes to Davina’s universal attractiveness. Not just unusually appealing to women, Miss Archworth is nearly irresistible to men. The narrator’s physical description of Davina, while less “shocking” than Haggard's undulating almost reptilian She, makes it clear that this is a woman no one dare ignore:

Davina was tall, with a head set strikingly on a dark-ivory neck; her springy dark hair, shortish, was tucked back behind her ears. Her features, well cut, were perhaps rather pronounced, but her sombreness and her unwilling smile could be enchanting. She could command that remarkable immobility possible only to nervously restless people, when only her dark eyes' intent and striking glitter betrayed the tension behind. She moved well, with an independent and colt-like carriage; her manner was, for a young woman’s, decided, a shade overbearing, intimidating to lovers whom her appearance beguiled. Had she had sphere, space, ease of mind, she might have been generous, active and even noble; emotion need only have played a small part in her life. She was a woman born to make herself felt. (377-78)

Davina's ability to charm and to intimidate is more than balanced, however, by her lack of “sphere, space, ease of mind.” What she was “born” to do has been corrupted in large part by “vague deficiency, the feebleness” that Bowen identified in her youth: a moral aimlessness of spirit. Haggard's Ayesha was called “She-who-must-be-obeyed” precisely because she possessed in large measure what the Davinas of the world so clearly lack: a purpose for the power at their command. Because she does not know what to do with her gifts, Davina finds them of no use at all. Her memories are “distorted” and she broods over “miscarried projects” with an “inflamed sense of self.” Snapping her fingers angrily, she habitually covers “miles a day” with a “long nervy mannish stride,” but she has nowhere to go and is only working off an excess of nervous energy. Cold and self-involved, she is first discovered by Marianne Harvey inadvertently in a “morning-room dense with smoke and loud with the wireless, from which Davina, glowering, found no way to escape” (370).

Davina is entombed in life every bit as much as Ayesha is buried in the ancient city of Kôr. The difference between them, however, is stark. While both are partially concealed from surprised interlopers, Davina is “veiled” in cigarette smoke, not in the yellowing gauze that protects mortals from Ayesha's awesome beauty. While She has “bathed in the Fire of Everlasting Life” and is waiting for the appearance of her reincarnated lover, Davina waits for nothing and exists in an empty world that is carefully constructed to mimic the desolation of Kôr. Bowen is particularly effective throughout the story in reducing the drama of Kôr to the tedium of a new London suburb.

Ayesha reigns over countless thousands of mummies who are burned for fuel and light; countless thousands more are piled beneath her chambers in a grave of gigantic proportions. Davina, as she steals out of
the house for an evening party, sees a different, a smaller kind of death in her aunt’s bridge game:

In the dense red-shaded lamplight sealed in by the pane the two ladies’ lace jabots, the two gentlemen’s shirt-fronts, stood out like tombstones: the intent quartette, the glazed cabinets and wooly white rugs, all looked embedded in something transparent, solid and hot, like clarified red wax. Not a sound came through the pane. (382)

When Davina’s “party” is finally convened at the country retreat of “Lord Thingummy” (who is absent and unaware of the intrusion), the house itself is closed for the season and wears a sepulchral air:

Indoors, the immense cold hall, all chequered pavement and pillars, wore an air of outrage, ravished by steps and voices. One door stood open, and light peered in at the glacial sheeted outlines of furniture and a chandelier that hung in a bag like cheese and glittered inside the muslin. A chill came from the hearthstones; the house was masterless. Along a pathway of drugget over the marble, at a quick muffled shuffle as though conducting a funeral secretly, the revellers passed down the hall to a door at the far end. (386).

One member of the assembly is Oliver, once Davina’s lover. In contrast to the centuries of She’s faithfulness and Leo’s devotion, both Davina and her Oliver have lost love with the prospect of money: “Their May had been blighted. Now, each immobile from poverty, each frozen into their settings like leaves in the dull ice of different puddles, they seldom met” (387). Oliver is Leo gone wrong. With his “height and fairness he was in an overcast kind of way, magnificent-looking: a broken-spirited Viking.” But something has happened; Oliver is without moral direction. As a result, “he was capable of fantastically disinterested affections. Not having been born for nothing into a privileged class, he was, like Davina, entirely unscrupulous” (389). He was “like Davina, an enemy of society, having been led to expect what he did not get” (388).

Both Oliver and Davina attempt to manipulate circumstance, in the vain hope that “something” would happen. Their evil is like their power, wasted on desire rather than spent on action. Real evil is active and is embodied in Prothero, the murderer who masquerades as a chauffeur. He suffocated his lover and then disposed of the real “Prothero” in order to assume a new identity. The second murder is as irrational as the first, since his lover’s husband is far more concerned with propriety than apprehending the criminal and so puts the police off the track. Dark and eerily forbidding, this Prothero quietly drives the car for Davina’s aunt, while at night he stalks his room “as though he were a ghost” (392) and writes to his dead lover letters which he burns before morning. Davina initially feels more powerful than this clearly satanic figure, exchanging money for kisses. Yet at the end of the story, when she confronts the chauffeur about his refusal to pass along a message from her friends, he delivers a message of his own:

“Mmm. I do what I want. And I take what I want, I don’t hang about for it. I wonder it doesn’t sicken a girl like you, hanging about here, waiting. You’d better get out. I’m through.
Don't keep coming after my money; it's not my money you want. I know your sort. Well, I'm through with all that. I'm buying not selling, these days. You keep your place, Miss Archworth, and I'll keep mine. You can't have it both ways. Good day.” (406)

Prothero is violent evil without conscience or reflection. He knows Davina is wasting her power in waiting about for the “something” that will not occur. Ironically, his mad faithfulness to the memory of the woman he murdered for “love” is strikingly similar to the devotion of She who waits for centuries for the reincarnation of the Killikrates that she murdered for exactly the same reason.

Davina learns nothing from this encounter, except that she must repay Prothero and avoid him further. Her manipulations and parties, like her attempt to corrupt Marianne, come to nothing. No new image is added to “the vacant glass of her mind” (405). Because she realizes once again how much she hates “having no power,” she decides to give up on any attempt to make events come to some conclusion. She has learned that events led nowhere, crisis was an illusion, and that passions of momentary violent reality were struck off like sparks from the spirit, only to die. One could precipitate nothing. One is empowered to live fully; occasion does not offer. (407)

Her manipulations of circumstances fail, since she lacks Ayesha's fire, her sparks only “die.” A divine in a modern parable, Davina will wait for nothing forever.

The reverse of this amoral woman’s futile attempts to manipulate events is the Bowen protagonist who flees any contact with a grim and uncompromising reality, preferring imagination to a deficient world. “Mysterious Kôr,” an open admission in her fiction of Bowen’s debt to Haggard, is perhaps the clearest example of this type of heroine. The story first appeared at the end of the war (1944) in Penguin New Writing (#20). In it, the roofless shells and the rubble of the London of the Nazi blitz resemble the Kôr that Bowen imagined in her youth. More than that, however, the shattered city provides a setting for a story that concerns not just She, but the creative conscience of Horace Holly who “controlled the magic” of Kôr, and, through the “power of the pen,” was the true creator of the “power of the cave.”

The story opens with Pepita walking the empty streets of London with her Arthur, who is home on his first night of leave. Because “something immaterial seemed to threaten and to be keeping people at home,” they had the city streets to themselves. Sitting in the empty desolation, Pepita begins to recite a poem about Kôr. This poem, repeated in fragments in the story, is actually not from She itself, but from a poem entitled “She” and dedicated “To H. R. H.” that was added to several (but by no means all) printings of the novel. It was placed after the title page and before the “Contents” page and was but two stanzas long:

Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand,
The fever-haunted forest and lagoon,
Bowen’s story about a war-time London girl whose imaginative visits to Kôr in sleep were more real to her than the presence of her love is, in several ways, well described by this poem. Surely after World War II, England and all the world was “disenchanted.” Europe had, in fact, sent “her spies through all the land” some time before Pepita begins to recite this poem. Fitting as this poem’s first stanza might be to the setting of the story, it is the second that reveals the imaginative power that possesses Pepita and is the substance of the story itself.

Arthur questions Pepita about this Kôr that, even in ruin, was better than London. She explains that “‘Kôr’s altogether different; it’s very strong; there is not a crack in it anywhere for a weed to grow in . . .’. ” (729). Arthur points to the second stanza of the poem (which apparently the reader is supposed to remember) as proof that “‘Kôr’s not really anywhere. When even a poem says there’s no place—.’ ” Pepita interrupts to explain that what the poem “‘tries to say doesn’t matter: I see what it makes me see.’ ” Her explanation of the poem then becomes an explanation of her hatred of modern life:

“Anyway, that was written some time ago, at that time when they thought they had got everything taped, because the whole world had been explored, even the middle of Africa. Every thing and place had been found and marked on some map; so what wasn’t marked on any map couldn’t be there at all. So they thought: that was why he wrote the poem. ‘The world is disenchanted,’ it goes on. That was what set me off hating civilization.” (730)

Pepita, instead of finding the war an example of disenchantment, decides that it is proof that Kôr might really exist after all. She is sure that “‘this war shows we’ve by no means come to the end. If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it. I don’t see why not’ ” (730). When Arthur objects that Pepita is thinking about the wrong things, that she should be thinking instead “‘about people,’ ” Pepita responds:

“What, these days?” she said. “Think about people? How can anyone think about people if they’ve got any heart? I don’t know how other girls manage: I always think about Kôr.” (730)

The ancient city is present not only in her daily thoughts and conversa-
tions, but also occupies her nights. We learn that when "Pepita lay like a mummy rolled half over" she dreamed of Kôr. This leaves Arthur and Pepita’s roommate Callie alone while she sleeps. They notice that the moon, just as in Haggard’s novel, is full and that it has a “power over London and the imagination” (739). Arthur cannot at first understand the strange significance that Kôr holds for Pepita, and Callie cannot explain it to him. She is the child “of a sheltered middle-class household” who had “kept physical distances all her life” (733). She is “like one of those candles on sale outside a church” since “there was something votive in her demeanour” (735). Eventually, however, Arthur begins to appreciate Pepita’s longing for Kôr and attempts a partial explanation to Callie. He realizes that in some way it takes his presence, whether real or imagined, for Pepita to escape successfully in sleep. He sees little harm in this, since “when two people have got no place, why not Kôr, as a start? There are no restrictions on wanting at any rate” (738). Callie’s objection is a standard plea for the values of the “real” world over the places of the imagination: “But, oh, Arthur, can’t wanting want what’s human?” Arthur yawns and provides a response that identifies not just Pepita’s disaffection, but the “vague deficiency” that Bowen herself had felt in her youth. “To be human” is, he says, “to be at a dead loss” (739).

Arthur realizes that Pepita’s powerful imagination ultimately will not unite, but will separate them. It is with this thought, this vague presage of the evil inherent in the power of the imagination, that the story ends. Pepita turns in her sleep and her arm accidentally strikes Callie on the face. It was, the narrator tells us, an unconscious “act of justice” that does not disturb Pepita:

She still lay, as she had lain, in an avid dream, of which Arthur had been the source, of which Arthur was not the end. With him she looked this way, down the wide, void, pure streets, between statues, pillars and shadows, through archways and colonnades. With him she went up the stairs down which nothing but mood came; with him trod the ermine dust of the endless halls, stood on terraces, mounted the extreme tower, looked down on the statued squares, the wide, void, pure streets. He was the password, but not the answer: it was to Kôr’s finality that she turned. (739-40)

Pepita’s flight from the world of Arthur and Callie to an imaginary city safe from the feebleness of human beings is not a complete answer to life’s difficulty. Arthur sees Kôr as a “start”; Pepita’s powerful imagination insists that “Kôr’s finality” was “the answer.” Her solution will prove the stronger because, like the creative imagination of Horace Holly, it is stronger than She herself. It alone could create Kôr and its imperial goddess. Arthur’s reasonableness will be no match for such strength.

This admission is the “magic” embedded in the tale that so entranced Bowen in her youth. It also is a clue to the moral “deficiency” that Bowen felt was the chief target of the Victorians, who sought to provide “an account of the battle for power that goes on in every unit of English middle-class life.” The spiritual and moral degeneration of a “feminine” English
society is what the Edwardians fled and Bowen sought to explore. For as Bowen learned from She, fiction is more powerful than reality. The ability to command the imagination creates the conditions necessary for reflection and change. It is this realization that links Elizabeth Bowen’s work with her Victorian counterparts and with Rider Haggard. By creating fiction that focuses on the “drama inside” the human spirit, Bowen herself managed to bathe in the “Fire of Everlasting Life.” She achieved what Horace Holly himself eventually desired—a deathless presence that speaks to successive generations. It is this voice, more powerfully present in Bowen’s stories than in her novels, that is one measure of the importance of her achievement. She has described like few before her the moral dilemma of women in English society. Her stories represent her own version of the “English psychological scene,” one that portrays in vivid detail the loneliness at the center of the relationship of women to their society. It is this truth that the Victorians could not live long enough to describe and the Edwardians lacked the courage to explore. It is nothing less than the loss of a woman’s power to feel, the death of the heart.

Works Cited
