

Victorian Male Heroes and Romance in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Fiction¹

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This article discusses the conjunction between the concepts of heroism and gender in late nineteenth-century adventure novels – what Elaine Showalter has termed “male romance”² – and twentieth-century short fiction by women writers. More specifically, the essay will focus on the aesthetic and ideological strategies that the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen deployed to reassess Henry Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* (1887) in the short story entitled *Mysterious Kôr*, published in the collection *The Demon Lover and Other Short Stories* (1945).

Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973) first read Henry Rider Haggard's *She* at the age of twelve, being at the height of her “first winter of discontent” with “the sheer uniformity of the human lot”.³ At that time, Bowen had already lost “the myths of childhood”, and the “thunder clouds” that mounted on the horizon which “were to burst in 1914” conveyed a feeling of bitter disenchantment.⁴ Although Haggard's novel was to remain one of Bowen's favourite books, her own appreciation of it appeared inextricably related to a profound sense of disenchantment which the imminent advent of the Great War conveyed. I will argue how, despite obvious differences between Haggard and Bowen's work, both narratives entail a disillusioned perspective pertaining to a world at the verge of disintegration and collapse which, in these writers' view, affected the individual, politics, literature and society at large. In fact, Second World War London shared a number of social and historical features with *fin-de-siècle* London,⁵ both giving rise to narratives that entailed a sense of the individual's struggle with dark and primitive forces, which the constructions of the heroic in Haggard and Bowen's narratives seek to counteract. Both Haggard and Bowen articulate their respective narratives as a literary response to personal and social disenchantment. In order to do so, Haggard's heroes and Bowen's heroine undergo a quest-myth, whose point of departure is a

¹ This article benefits from the collaboration of the research projects ‘Women's Tales’: The Short Fiction of Contemporary British Writers, 1974–2013 (FEM2013-41977-P) and “Intersections: Gender and Identity in the Short Fiction of Contemporary British Women Writers (FEM2017-83084-P, AEI, FEDER), the Research Network *Rede de investigação em Língua e Literatura Inglesa II* (R2014/043) and the research group Discourse and Identity (GRC2015/002; GI-1924).

² Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Harmondsworth 1990, p. 79.

³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Hermione Lee, London 1986, p. 247.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁵ Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London*, London 2010, p. 5.

civilization on the verge of destruction and which is in itself, as Ronald Asch argues, “a half-ironic re-enchantment of a world disenchanted by science and rational thought”.⁶

As a consequence, both Haggard and Bowen deploy the “heroic” as a strategy of re-enchantment, drawing on the myth of King Arthur as a heroic model which would hypothetically imply bringing ancient and honourable standards to life in the modern world. Although in substantially different ways, Haggard and Bowen invoke the heroic potential of King Arthur as the embodiment of Englishness and national identity in times of crisis. However, whereas hero worship became a potent force in Victorian ideation and, more specifically, in privileging a particular construction of masculinity, Bowen critically departs from such premises by undermining Arthur’s liberating potential and displacing it to the narrative’s female character. Bowen is careful in articulating difference from Haggard’s narrative and draws from many of his literary motifs to produce not only a female version of an imaginative escape – which she defines as “the saving hallucination”⁷ – but also to privilege the heroic experience of a woman in times of war and the hardships of the civilian, which history has traditionally superseded to favour male accounts of the battlefield.

Thus, in *Mysterious Kôr* (1945) Bowen both draws and departs from Haggard’s prototypical male romance *She* by simultaneously incorporating his literary landscape into her story, yet also by questioning some Victorian ideological assumptions inherent to Haggard’s novel. In addition, Bowen opens an intertextual dialogue not only with Haggard’s text, but also with the work of those Victorians that had informed his novel, most notably with Andrew Lang’s sonnet *She* – compiled in the collection *Grass of Parnassus* (1888) – and with Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

As will be discussed, Bowen’s allusions to Haggard’s novel in the short story are not directly retrieved from his narrative but from Andrew Lang’s eponymous sonnet *She*. Lang had been personally involved in the composition of the novel, assessing and correcting Haggard’s manuscript at different stages of its composition. Significantly, Bowen’s allusion to Lang reveals a web of Victorian connections among literary and anthropological works, all of them seminal to the construction of a particular conception of maleness and heroism which late nineteenth-century romances reflect, and which Bowen seeks to question.

Lang was a prominent anthropologist and literary critic, who functioned as a “circulator of ideas” of the works of other Victorian anthropologists and writers,

⁶ Ronald G. Asch, *The Hero in Early Modern Period and Beyond: An Elusive Cultural Construct and an Indispensable Focus of Social Identity?*, in: *helden. heroes. héros. Special Issue 1*, 2014: Languages and Functions of the Heroic, pp. 5–14, here p. 10. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2014/QM.

⁷ Bowen, *Mulberry Tree* (Fn. 3), p. 97.

such as Edward Tylor, Henry Rider Haggard and Sigmund Freud.⁸ Despite the disparate nature of these authors' work, all of them seemed to share a common attempt found in late imperial culture to define civilised European masculinity in a world overtly dominated by what they saw as "feminine" concerns, such as the "corrupting knowledge of telegraphs, steam, daily newspapers and universal suffrage".⁹ These writers sought to counterbalance the values of a technologized world, of capitalist mass-production and bourgeois over-refinement by advocating a return to mythical and more authentic roots in the form of heroic quests and adventures, most often and paradoxically taking place in the confines of the civilised world.¹⁰

In 1885, Lang met Haggard and they became close friends: Haggard dedicated *She* to Lang. In turn, Lang's article *Realism and Romance* (1887) championed the work of Robert Louis Stevenson and Haggard over the realist domestic novel; in this article, Lang explicitly used Tylor's ideas to connect Haggard and Stevenson's romances to a primitive, myth-making stage of human culture, which is core to Haggard's *She*. In fact, Lang's influential *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887) was published nearly simultaneously with *She*, a novel which draws on some of Lang's assumptions on anthropological theory. Significantly, Lang's *Social Origins* (1903) and *The Secret of the Totem* (1905) are both cited by Freud in *Totem und Tabu* (Totem and Taboo, 1913), a book which takes up the theme of primal anxiety according to Psomiades,¹¹ a theme which amounts to a late-Victorian anxiety in the same general area of Haggard's *She*. In turn, Haggard's novel was one of Freud's favourite books, cited in *Die Traumdeutung* (The Interpretation of Dreams, 1900). Significantly, Freud discusses Haggard's novel *apropos* of a dream of his own regarding an encounter with Louise N. and describes the novel as an example of "the eternal feminine, the immortality of our emotions",¹² which Psomiades reads as an attempt to define "civilized, European masculinity against its others – femininity, the 'primitive,' the 'savage' – by praising a genre, Romance, which could restore 'savage masculinity'".¹³

⁸ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, Hidden Meaning: Andrew Lang, H. Rider Haggard, Sigmund Freud, and Interpretation, in: Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net 64, 2013, pp. 1–36, here p. 1: <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/2013-n64-ravon01452/1025669ar/>, 6 February 2018.

⁹ Julia Reid, "Gladstone Bags, Shooting Boots, and Bryant & May's Matches": Empire, Commerce, and the Imperial Romance in the *Graphic's* Serialization of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, in: *Studies in the Novel* 43, Issue 2, 2011, pp. 152–178, here p. 153.

¹⁰ Lang read Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) while at Oxford, supported his anthropological theory of myth against the philological theories of Max Müller, and collected these views in *Custom and Myth* (1884), which he dedicated to Tylor. As Robert Segal explains in *Hero Myths* (London 2000, p. 12), the study of hero myths goes back at least to 1871, when Edward Tylor argued that many of them followed a uniform plot: the hero is exposed at birth, is saved by other humans or animals and grows up to become a national hero.

¹¹ Psomiades, Hidden Meaning (Fn. 8), p. 22.

¹² The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, ed. and transl. by A. A. Brill, London 1995, p. 397.

¹³ Psomiades, Hidden Meaning (Fn. 8), p. 22.

Late-Victorian romance was attractive to its many readers for, among other things, its “interest in maleness”.¹⁴ Elaine Showalter relates the revival of romance in the 1880s with the literary expression of male anxiety to replace “the heterosexual romance of courtship, manners, and marriage that had been the specialty of women writers” with “the masculine and homosocial ‘romance’ of adventure and quest, descended from Arthurian epic”.¹⁵

In his critical work, Lang produced a passionate defence of the Romance Revival: in the poem *The Restoration of Romance* (1887) – dedicated to Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle and Haggard himself – Lang explicitly established a connection between the genre’s virility and Victorian ideation concerning myth and heroism:

King Romance was wounded deep,
All his knights were dead and gone,
All his court was fallen on sleep,
In a vale of Avalon!
Nay, men said, he will not come,
Any night or any morn.
Nay, his puissant voice is dumb,
Silent his enchanted horn! [...]
Then you came from South and North,
From Tugela, from the Tweed,
Blazoned his achievements forth,
King Romance is come indeed!
All his foes are overthrown,
All their wares cast out in scorn,
King Romance hath won his own,
And the lands where he was born!¹⁶

In the poem, Lang refers to “King Romance” as heir to Arthur and Arthurian epic, to his mythical kingdom – now dormant and forgotten, awaiting to be resurrected – and to the vale of Avalon, Arthur’s final destination after death, from where he shall return whenever England is in danger of foreign invasion and domestic disintegration. By doing so, Lang invokes the spirit of King Arthur, conjuring up the virtues which the hero and his knights represent: national unity against the threat of barbarians, honesty and virility, and, ultimately, English national identity. As Kennedy suggests,¹⁷ the publications of nineteenth-century editions of Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* (1485) occurred when many in England believed that Medieval chivalry could be a guide for the conduct of a

¹⁴ Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: Identity and Empire*, Cambridge 1996, p. 89.

¹⁵ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* (Fn. 2), p. 79.

¹⁶ Andrew Lang, *The Complete Poems of Andrew Lang*, Vol. 2, ed. by Peter-Eric Philipp, New York 2000.

¹⁷ Edward Donald Kennedy (Ed.), *King Arthur: A Casebook* (Arthurian Characters and Themes; 1), London 2002, p. xxxiii.

gentleman and when many looked at the Middle Ages as a time of harmony and order, a particular construction which a large number of Victorian intellectuals and artists celebrated in their work, such as the innumerable Pre-Raphaelite pictorial recreations of the Arthurian legend, Edward Bulwer Lytton's *King Arthur* (1849), William Morris's *The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems* (1858), W. J. Linton's *The Old Legend of King Arthur* (1865), A. C. Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882) and *The Tale of Balen* (1896) or, most notably, Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1885).

Thus, the nineteenth century witnessed an interest in the Middle Ages since for many this era provided the roots of many of the characteristics seen as essential features of national identity, including the origins of their political system, the foundations of their economic and social order, and the beginnings of their territorial empire.¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) must be understood in tune with this and represented the landmark of Victorian ideation of heroes and the heroic. For Carlyle, heroes had the potential to resolve the problems of democratic and industrial modernity which, in his view, resulted in the individual's exploitation and eventual alienation as a result of a shift from royal authority to a laissez-faire economy, which isolates people from a sense of community and society. As Chris R. Vanden Bossche explains,

Carlyle's works represent and attempt to resolve dilemmas raised by what he and his contemporaries perceived as a revolutionary shift of authority in virtually all realms of discourse and institutions of power in Western Europe. From his vantage point, it appeared not only that authority had shifted but the transcendental grounds for it had been undermined.¹⁹

In fact, Carlyle regarded democracy as a political expression of despair from not finding heroes to govern.²⁰ Significantly, Tennyson's influential *Idylls of the King* was prefaced by a dedication to the then-deceased Prince Albert, whom Tennyson regarded as his "ideal knight" in his possession of the traditional characteristics attributed to heroes:

Thou noble Father of her Kings to be,
Laborious for her people and her poor –
Voice in the rich dawn of an ampler day –
Far-sighted summoner of War and Waste
To fruitful strifes and rivalries of peace –
Sweet nature gilded by the gracious gleam
Of letters, dear to Science, dear to Art,

¹⁸ Stephanie L. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood*, Oxford 2000, p. 28.

¹⁹ Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*, Columbus, OH 1991, p. 1.

²⁰ Daniela Garofalo, *Communities in Mourning: Making Capital Out of Loss in Carlyle's Past and Present and Heroes*, in: *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 45, Issue 3, 2003, pp. 293–314, here p. 297.

Dear to thy land and ours, a Prince indeed,
 Beyond all titles, and a household name,
 Hereafter, through all times, Albert the Good.²¹

Paradoxically enough, the attributes of heroism seem to be absent in Victoria's nature despite her actually being the reigning monarch, and Tennyson only briefly refers to her at the dedication's closing as a prospective example of woman's inconstancy:

Break not, O woman's-heart, but still endure;
 Break not, for thou art Royal, but endure,
 Remembering all the beauty of that star
 Which shone so close beside Thee that ye made
 One light together, but has past and leaves
 The Crown a lonely splendour.²²

As Elliot Gilbert notes,²³ Tennyson presents Albert as an active force of national life, whereas Queen Victoria appears in the dedication as the passive wife, all revealing of Tennyson's ideology pertaining to domesticity, gender and power.

As argued above, the nineteenth-century profusion of heroic reassessments is strongly connected with British nationalism in the nineteenth century and with a particular construction of maleness: those masculine heroes not only provided exemplars of British superiority, but also displayed the heroic efforts of the great individuals that the nation had produced.²⁴ Similarly, the construction of British manhood was a pervasive theme in Victorian culture, based on "the era's intersecting needs to recognize national character and revere national heroes, and the Arthurian legend was revived as part of this quest for the timeless model of manhood",²⁵ as Debra Mancoff pointed out. Arthur's legend also implied bringing ancient, honourable standards to life in the modern world, to the point that each phase of Arthur's life was offered to the Victorians as a lesson in manly action:

The bold youth transformed to tempered manhood through the acquisition of Excalibur, the true lover faithful to his marriage vows; the public servant who placed duty over private gain and pleasure; and the fallen hero dying in fellowship and dignity, leaving his life example as legacy.²⁶

²¹ Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, London 1885 (Repr. New York 2012), p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Elliot Gilbert, *The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse*, in: Edward Donald Kennelly (Ed.), *King Arthur: A Casebook*, London 2002, pp. 229–255, here p. 233.

²⁴ Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity* (Fn. 18), p. 12.

²⁵ Debra Mancoff, *To Take Excalibur: King Arthur and the Construction of Victorian Manhood*, in: Edward Donald Kennedy (Ed.), *King Arthur: A Casebook*, London 2002, pp. 257–280, here p. 257.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Such an act of cultural self-definition was of course fuelled by England's heroic deeds, exemplified by the country's position as a world leader in politics, industry and the rise of a vast colonial empire.

In general terms, the Arthurian legend remained the vehicle of those who used the Medieval past to support a conservative vision of the British nation.²⁷ As Tennyson had done before him, Lang invoked the ghost of Arthur to return in face of the threat from barbarians or, in modern terms, of what Stephen Arata has termed the fear of "reverse colonization",²⁸ the anxiety of Western countries to be overrun by primitive forces, where a fearful reversal of antagonistic positions occurs. In addition to this, 'domestic' issues also warranted Arthur's attention: the new capitalist, technologized and over-refined society of mass-production and urban environments threatened the existence of organic communities, characterised by more authentic human relationships and individual bonds.

However, as any literary text, Haggard's novel is riddled with contradictions: the ideal, organic community, which heroic Arthur represents, is at odds with the late-Victorian capitalist economy of mass culture and production. While Haggard and his circle criticised this economy, it simultaneously granted their work the circulation, popularity and critical recognition which they desired. Although Haggard felt the urge to endow his characters with the virtues and values that Arthur represented, the novel offers more sinister and disturbing undertones provided by its references to the cultural production of some of his contemporaries (more concretely, Lang and Freud). Exploring the origins of civilization by returning to a primitive stage in human development violently clashed with late Victorian's dreams of order and stability that the myth of Arthur represented. This is, in my view, strongly connected with Victorian anxieties concerning the end of England's world supremacy and the disintegration of the British Empire, whose first symptoms were already visible in late Victorian times.

Henry Rider Haggard's *She* epitomises most of the public ideals pertaining to gender, power and imperial ideology, encapsulated in a heroic quest-myth of male ambition and desire. The male protagonists of Haggard's novel, Horace Holly and Leo Vincey, leave Cambridge on a journey to the heart of Africa with the intention of avenging the death of Leo's ancestor, Kallikrates. As Holly and Vincey journey across a symbolic, primeval landscape, they withdraw from the historical sites of European civilization. Kôr, the characters' final destination – *axis mundi* – brings to mind a primordial journey to the origins of humanity, precisely the subject-matter of those anthropological works (Tylor's, Lang's and Freud's) that had inspired the novel. As Evelyn Hinz notes:

One is able to appreciate the historical significance of these [the novel's] events. That an Egyptian goddess should have a priest indicates, in the first place, that both old orders have begun to decline; the marriage of the Egyptian Amenartas and the Greek

²⁷ Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity* (Fn. 18), p. 39.

²⁸ Arata, *Fictions of Loss* (Fn. 14), p. 108.

Kallikrates, in turn, signals the birth of the new order, specifically, the beginning of the Western world; the flight-exodus motif, finally, suggests [...] the Judaic cast of the resulting culture and the accompanying linear nature of its concept of time and history.²⁹

Futhermore, Holly and Vincey ‘penetrate’ the centre – the core, Kôr – of an exotic civilization, significantly construed by the Western man as the ‘primitive’ where his wildest sexual fantasies can be realised as opposed to the strictures of Victorian sexual mores in a place “where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe”.³⁰

Significantly, Haggard’s *She* represents a revealing move from what Sara Wasson has described as the nineteenth-century “gothitisation of city space as a result of industrialisation”³¹ by exploring a return to more primitive societal communities. Bowen’s *Mysterious Kôr* represents a move in the opposite direction: whereas Kôr remains the characters’ mental landscape, the narrative focuses on the physical and psychological implications of the Blitz in war-stricken London, which is, like Kôr itself, rapidly disintegrating: “FULL moonlight drenched the city and searched it; there was not a niche left to stand in. London looked like the moon’s capital – shallow, cratered, extinct.”³²

In the midst of the city’s desolation, extinct after the “evacuation of the living”,³³ “a girl and a soldier” wander through the streets, seeming “to have no destination but each other”.³⁴ The soldier, significantly named Arthur, is on leave, and has come to London to see his girlfriend Pepita, but their hopes of sharing some moments of intimacy are shattered by the refusal of Pepita’s roommate, Callie, to leave the flat which the two girls share. The characters’ sexual frustration increases as the story progresses, alternately focusing on Arthur and Pepita’s reflections as they are forced to sleep in their separate beds.

Significantly, Bowen’s *Mysterious Kôr* also draws on the myth of King Arthur, which was at the time also part of the English heroic repository as Europe edged closer to war: King Arthur would be in the position of defending England against foreign invasion. As Anthony Burgess notes, a curious rumour circulated in England in 1940, stating that “Arthur had come again to drive out the expected invader”, and “Arthur would never really die”.³⁵ Significantly, the 1940s witnessed a large number of rewritings of the Arthurian myth: pacifist-inspired T. H. White’s tetralogy *The Once and Future King* (1958) – whose first volumes were published during the course of World War II – was one of the most popular Arthurian reas-

²⁹ Evelyn Hinz, Rider Haggard’s *She*: An Archetypal ‘History of Adventure’, in: *Studies in the Novel* 4, Issue 3, 1972, pp. 416–430, here p. 419.

³⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1979, p. 190.

³¹ Wasson, *Urban Gothic* (Fn. 5), p. 152.

³² *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, Harmondsworth 1983, p. 728.

³³ Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture*, Cambridge 2011, p. 9.

³⁴ Bowen, *Collected Stories* (Fn. 32), p. 729.

³⁵ Anthony Burgess, *English Literature: A Survey for Students*, London 1974, p. 25.

sessments. White specifically related Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* with his own pacifist concerns at the outbreak of World War II, discussing the therapeutic quality of Arthurian literature as "an antidote to war" in this gloomy panorama.³⁶ The fifth volume of White's heroic reassessment of King Arthur, which he was writing in 1940, was conceived of as a culmination of the previous one, where "the epic theme is War and how to stop it" and the heroic values that the Knights of the Round Table represent could be regarded as an "anti-Hitler measure".³⁷

However, and unlike White, Bowen rewrites Arthur in an unheroic fashion in order to invest the female character in the narrative with traditionally male heroic virtues, such as courage, resolution, action and insight. As happens in the classical world of traditional heroes, war is the privileged stage for the hero's exploits: among other things, war implies a state of exception in which the normal *status quo* is temporarily suspended. Bowen presents in the story such a momentary suspension of warfare, when traditional heroes most often sought the company of women after the hardships of battle. In the many nineteenth-century permutations of the Arthurian legend, women were often related to Camelot's downfall by using their 'female' powers (beauty and sexual allure) to achieve destructive and malevolent ends. Significantly, Bowen reverses the pattern by presenting a feminised, paralysed Arthur and a powerful, active female character, Pepita, who takes the lead.

Bowen's particular reassessment of heroic Arthur testifies to her playful reversal of gender roles in the story: Arthur is led by Pepita through the streets of London to her place. On their way, Pepita quotes some lines from Andrew Lang's poem, which Arthur fails to identify: "'Mysterious Kôr.' What is?" he [Arthur] said, not quite collecting himself. 'This is – "*Mysterious Kôr thy walls forsaken stand, / Thy lonely towers beneath a lonely moon*–"/ – this is Kôr."³⁸

³⁶ Sylvia Townsend Warner, T. H. White: A Biography, London 1967, p. 178.

³⁷ François Gallix, T. H. White and the Legend of King Arthur: From Animal Fantasy to Political Morality, in: Edward Donald Kennelly (Ed.), *King Arthur: A Casebook*, London 2002, pp. 281–297, here p. 283.

³⁸ Bowen, *Complete Stories* (Fn. 32), p. 729. Despite the fact that Pepita accurately describes Haggard's imaginary landscape in the novel, she quotes Andrew Lang's sonnet *She*:

Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand,
The fever-haunted forest and lagoon,
Mysterious Kôr [sic] thy walls forsaken stand,
Thy lonely towers beneath the lonely moon,
Not there doth Ayesha linger, rune by rune
Spelling strange scriptures of a people banned.
The world is disenchanted; over soon
Shall Europe send her spies through all the land?
Nay, not in Kôr, but in whatever spot,
In town or field, or by the insatiate sea,
Men brood on buried loves, and unforget,
Or break themselves on some divine decree,
Or would o'erleap the limits of their lot,

For Pepita, Kôr's magnificent, intact monuments stand in opposition to London's ruined buildings, implying the possibility of regeneration which the power of the miraculous Grail would entail, and which would save her from the state of destruction and disenchantment of a modern waste land. However, Arthur remains in ignorance, failing to be enlightened by Pepita's imaginative vision, and this puts an end to the possibility of his renewal and redemption, as Pepita remarks: "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 [...]. By the time we've come to the end, Kôr may be the one city left: the abiding city".³⁹

While delaying the arrival at home where she and Arthur would have to sleep in separate beds,⁴⁰ Pepita thinks about Kôr as a means of relieving frustration at Arthur's suggestion to "populate Kôr"⁴¹ and regards Kôr as a place of possibilities where she might eventually experience sexual desire in full, as she rather enigmatically says to Arthur: "To think about Kôr *is* to think about you and me [...]. We'd be alone [there]".⁴²

Pepita's passionate defence of Kôr as a place of possibilities, as the "abiding city", recalls Bowen's discussions on the therapeutic quality of literature in times of crisis, which in the postscript of the American edition of *The Demon Lover* (1945), she describes as "the saving hallucination" or, put differently, "the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to be identified, and by which the destiny seemed to be assured".⁴³ Pepita's attachment to Kôr as an alternative to chaos and destruction matches what Bowen defines as the "search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world" which produces "small world-within-worlds of hallucination – in most cases, saving hallucination".⁴⁴

If Haggard's novel brings to mind Victorian discussions on the relationship between the individual, the primeval and societal bonds as discussed by Lang and Freud, Bowen's concept of the 'saving hallucination' recalls Freud's ruminations on the impact of popular literature on the adult subject in *Der Dichter und das Phantasieren* (1908), translated into English as "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" or as "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming". In the child's most absorbing occupation, play, the things of his world are rearranged and ordered in a way which pleases the child. In so doing, Freud argues, the mechanics of the child's play resemble the work of the creative writer, who produces "a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously [...] he invests it with a great deal of affect, while

There, in the tombs and deathless, dwelleth SHE!

(Andrew Lang, *Grass of Parnassus*, London 2007, p. 42).

³⁹ Bowen, *Complete Stories* (Fn. 32), p. 730.

⁴⁰ Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow across the Page*, Edinburgh 2003, p. 21.

⁴¹ Bowen, *Collected Stories* (Fn. 32), p. 731.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 730.

⁴³ Bowen, *Mulberry Tree* (Fn. 3), p. 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

separating it sharply from reality".⁴⁵ In fact, and as Freud explains, fantasy is the adult's exchange for childhood play, which he calls "day-dream".⁴⁶ Whereas in common daily activities adults are normally ashamed of confessing the nature of their fantasies, writers – especially "the less pretentious writers of romances, novels and stories", Freud argues – give way to their fantasies in their literary creations by means of the construction of a "hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the author tries to win our sympathy by every possible means, and whom he places under the protection of a special providence [...] whose invulnerability very clearly betrays – His Majesty the Ego, the hero of all day-dreams and all novels".⁴⁷ Significantly, Freud even suggests the possibility of myths being "distorted vestiges of the wish-phantasies of whole nations" or "the age-long dreams of young humanity".⁴⁸ Readers experience great pleasure in approaching this particular type of popular fiction, which releases the tension of one's mind without reproach or shame.⁴⁹

Pepita's experience as a reader of Haggard and Lang's texts overlaps with her own construction of it – which may well correspond to the character's first approach to these works in late childhood, thus mirroring Bowen's own experience and appreciation of Haggard's text. Unlike the other adult characters in the story – who fail to understand the significance of Pepita's particular construction of Kôr – Pepita is not ashamed of confessing the nature of her day-dreams, for they constitute a psychic strategy to counterbalance chaos and destruction, as Bowen herself explained in the aforementioned postscript to the collection of stories:

Personal life here, too, put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it – war. Everyone here, as is known, read more: and what was sought in books – old books, new books – was the communicative touch of personal life. To survive, not only physically, but spiritually, was essential.⁵⁰

Pepita's day-dream of Kôr springs from the therapeutic power of literature and its possibility of bringing about mental and spiritual relief.

Mysterious Kôr closes with Pepita's partial realization of her Freudian fantasy through a nocturnal dream – "fulfilment of desires in exactly the same way as day-dreams are",⁵¹ Freud argues – which lays bare the nature of the character's desires:

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, that 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 moon came; with him trod the ermine dust of endless halls, stood on terraces, mounted the extreme tower,

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming*, in: Philip Rieff (Ed.), *Character and Culture*, London 1963, pp. 34–43, here p. 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ Bowen, *Mulberry Tree* (Fn. 2), p. 97.

⁵¹ Freud, *Poet to Day-Dreaming* (Fn. 45), p. 39.

looked down on the statued squares, the wide, void, pure streets. He was the password, but not the answer: it was to Kôr finality that she turned.⁵²

Pepita's dream functions as an assertion of the character's independent sexuality, of which Arthur is "the password, but not the answer".

As a conclusion, Lang's poem resonates through Bowen's *Mysterious Kôr* as a literary response to the disenchantment of the world. In fact, Lang's plea for a return to epic and magical roots accounts for the 'mysterious' quality which Kôr still holds for disenchanted Pepita. For Pepita, the imaginary existence of Kôr offers the therapeutic value of compensating for the desiccation produced by war, re-enchanting the subject in the face of grounded fears of death and complete annihilation. Haggard and Lang also conceived of romances as a literary response to the sense of disenchantment with a progressively mechanized, scientific and reason-governed world, which could be however 're-enchanting' through the imaginative quests which these narratives entail: Kôr's autonomous mythic world would provide readers with the enchantment which the scientific discourse had superseded. The reassessment of the myth of King Arthur in both narratives becomes revealing of particular, and even divergent constructions of heroism and heroic qualities, which are in these texts revisited to fit in mutable concerns and constructions of what heroism and gender actually entail.

⁵² Bowen, *Collected Stories* (Fn. 32), p. 740.