**"Curiously Near Akin": The Queer Imperial Gothic Heroes
of Bertram Mitford and Victoria Cross**

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<1>"Goodbye, my—ideal!" With these words Lilith Ormskirk parts forever from her former lover Laurence Stanninghame (Mitford 231). Unbeknownst to her, Laurence has spent his five-year absence engaged in the illegal slave trade in the unsettled interior of Africa, coming into contact with mysterious lost tribes and facing grisly horrors. But although Lilith never learns the full truth about the man she claims as her "ideal," there is no irony in her passionate declaration. What has attracted Laurence to Lilith in the first place is his unconventionality, his refusal to conform to society's expectations for a man of his class. Laurence, we are told, is "peculiarly unsusceptible to public opinion, which, if it influenced him at all, did so in the very opposite direction to that which was intended" (53). Far from the Victorian masculine ideal, Laurence is no chivalrous defender of imperialist paternalism. Rather he is ingenious, cagey, and fiercely individualist. That this unconventional figure is upheld as "ideal" points to the queerness at the heart of Bertram Mitford's 1896 adventure novel, *The Sign of the Spider*.

<2>This queerness is shockingly evident in the climactic scene of the novel, in which Laurence prepares to defend himself against an enormous spider using the bones of his former companions who have recently become the spider's victims:

> And now the skeletons underwent the most ruthless desecration. Several were wrenched asunder ere he had selected half a dozen of the most serviceable bones—and these he hammered to the required size with his newly constructed mace—sharpening them on the rough face of the rock. And then as with a glow of satisfaction he sat down to rest and contemplate his handiwork, he almost laughed over the grim whimsicality of it. Did ever mortal man go into close conflict armed in such a fashion—he wondered—with club and dagger manufactured out of the bones of men? (205)

Where other, less enterprising men have died, Laurence survives on account of his willingness to break the most unspeakable taboos in the interests of self-preservation. Earlier in the novel,

Laurence and his motley crew have encountered tribes of bloodthirsty cannibals, portrayed as gibbering throwbacks to prehistoric humanity, such as only the "dark places of the earth" can produce. That Laurence does not hesitate to defile the bodies of the dead, and then laughs at the "grim whimsicality" of his innovation, aligns him with the abhorred, atavistic cannibals. The imagery is reminiscent of Kurtz's gruesome fence topped with the heads of his enemies. But unlike Conrad's Kurtz, Laurence's flirtation with "going native" and his resorting to savagery does not damage him. It saves him.

<3>Despite Laurence's amorality and his rejection of Victorian social norms and expectations, he is not the monster of Mitford's lurid Gothic tale. Nor is Lilith the monster, despite her foreboding name, her colonial origins (she is not English, but a native South African), and the qualities aligning her with the menacing "New Woman" figure. Unlike most of the "Imperial Gothic" novels that proliferated at the end of the Victorian Era, *Dracula* being a prime example, in *The Sign of the Spider*, Victorian morality does not triumph, and the superiority of the English race is not reaffirmed. Instead, the novel dispenses with the hypocrisy of the crumbling Victorian paradigm, which it presents as a destructive, degenerating force. By presenting Laurence Stanninghame as a new ideal of masculinity, the novel rejects Victorian convention in favor of a new standard that privileges the hybrid and the queer, the qualities most fitted to adapt to the changing ecosystem of imperial decline. As I intend to show, the ideals driving *The Sign of the Spider*, though "queer," are not unique. In this essay I consider two largely forgotten novels of the late Victorian era whose male protagonists embody queer masculinity as a new ideal: *The Sign of the Spider* and Victoria Cross's 1903 novel *Six Chapters of a Man's Life*.([1])

<4>That the end of the nineteenth century was a time of great social upheaval in England is well established. In particular, the Victorian standard of masculinity was threatened by developments in the political, economic, and scientific arenas, as well as by the rise of subversive movements such as aestheticism and "New Woman" feminism. At this time Victorian society was preoccupied by concerns about evolution and degeneration as it applied to English civilization, and the concept of social engineering through eugenics was widely accepted. Such measures, it was supposed, were necessary to ensure the evolutionary success of the English race. The combined dangers of sexually liberated women and "dissipated natives" threatened the imperial patriarch, whose responsibility was to further the race. However, as I will discuss, Laurence Stanninghame, and Cecil Ray, the hero of *Six Chapters*, stand in stark relief against the fears of the period that produces them. These figures completely reject the responsibilities of the imperialist patriarch conferred upon them by Victorian society. But if they are symbols of Victorianism's decline, they also portend a new model of masculinity for a modern age, the reflection of a bleak post-Darwinian outlook facing the dawn of the twentieth century.

<5>In *The Sign of the Spider*, Laurence Stanninghame walks out on his family and travels to South Africa, hoping to "make his pile" speculating in the gold fields (6). On the way he meets the "bewitching" Lilith Ormskirk, and the two develop an irresistible attraction for each other. Laurence fails in his investments; in dire straits he gets mixed up in the illegal slave trade in the interior of the continent. Two years into this expedition the slavers are attacked by the Ba-gcatya, a legendary "lost" tribe of supposed Zulu lineage. Laurence is spared and ultimately accepted by the tribe because he bears "the sign of the spider"—actually a metal locket inscribed with Lilith's monogram in florid script resembling a spider. Laurence rises to a position of influence among the Ba-gcatya, but after a series of reversals, he is sacrificed to the ghoulish giant spider the tribe venerates. He manages to fend off the monster long enough to be rescued by Lindela, a niece of the Ba-gcatya king, who has fallen in love with him. Laurence and Lindela attempt to escape to "civilization," but she dies, ironically, of a spider bite. When he finally returns to Johannesburg, he learns that Lilith has married. He returns to England and his family a wealthy man.

<6>*Six Chapters of a Man's Life* charts the ill-fated affair of Cecil Ray and Theodora Dudley.   Cecil, an Egyptologist, prefers the "Oriental" lifestyle he has become accustomed to in his travels to the rigid social conventions of England. He becomes the lover of the equally unconventional and alluringly androgynous Theodora, and the two travel to Egypt together.   During their travels, Theodora dresses as a man and goes by "Theodore" to avoid scandal. After arriving in Port Said, Cecil and "Theodore" go in search of an "authentic" Egyptian diversion, which ends in Theodora being imprisoned and raped by a group of Arab men. She is later released to Cecil, but unable to overcome her shame she ultimately commits suicide. The book ends with Cecil, deserted and fatally ill, lamenting the "egoism" of his love for Theodora, on which he blames her death.

<7>Widely divergent in conceit as they appear to be, both novels are characterized by an intricately-woven queerness which plays out against a backdrop of deep-seated English anxieties about gender, race, and empire; lurking in the depths of both novels is an unknowable, racialized Otherness that threatens the essence of Victorian Englishness. The senses in which I use "queer" throughout this essay reflect Ardel Haefele-Thomas's assertion that the term "supplies room for multiple, potentially polyvalent positions, conveying gender, sexuality, race, class and familial structures beyond heteronormative (and often bourgeois) social constructs" (Haefele-Thomas 4).   That is to say, the term "queer" includes but goes beyond the senses in which it has primarily been used: in the nineteenth century to denote "the generally weird, odd or ill," and in the twentieth century as a derogatory label for homosexuality (Haefele-Thomas 3). The queerness of Laurence and Cecil operates on multiple levels; both are frequently described as weird, odd, or ill; and while homoeroticism figures only as a subtle undercurrent in *The Sign of the Spider*, Cecil's homoerotic—even unambiguously

homosexual—desires and experiences are presented with surprising directness in *Six Chapters*. But more significantly, both deliberately seek to disrupt the boundaries of gender and racial difference. Laurence's observation that "savage and civilized" appear to be "curiously near akin" (216) speaks to the privileging of queerness that takes place in both novels.

<8>Mitford's baroque adventure tale of "darkest Africa" and Cross's Orientalist, psychosexual drama also share many characteristics of what Patrick Brantlinger calls "Imperial Gothic." Imperial Gothic literature uses "Gothic elements to suggest that the Anglo-Saxon race of the Empire itself was imperiled" (*Victorian Literature* 45). These themes are certainly present in *The Sign of the Spider* and *Six Chapters*. It is not difficult to see the brutal and primitive Bagcatya and their hideous spider god as the outward projections of Laurence Stanninghame's inner savagery and monstrosity. The corroding, decadent Orientalism that Cecil and Theodora have internalized becomes monstrosity manifest in the sexually voracious but otherwise indistinct Arabs that imprison Theodora. The Other is the figure of horror around which the Imperial Gothic plot revolves, but the real horror of Imperial Gothic is not the outward symbol—the giant spider or lecherous Arab—but the capacity of the white characters to shed what separates them from this otherness and "go native" (Brantlinger, *Victorian Literature* 46). The latent impulse to savagery resides in even the most stalwart British chauvinist; contact with the Other is not the cause of degeneracy, but only a catalyst for unleashing the already present savagery. On the surface, *The Sign of the Spider* and *Six Chapters* appear to be cautionary tales about the dangers of flirting with Otherness. But as cynical as Mitford and Cross's novels are about the future of English civilization, ultimately what they offer is neither a warning about the decline of patriarchal-imperialist Victorianism, nor a lament for its decease. While it is possible to read the novels as chronicling the heroes' degeneration, it should be remembered that Laurence and Cecil reject "civilization" at the outset, and to the extent that they return from their journey into decadence and savagery, it cannot be said that they have been "reformed" by their experiences. Laurence does return to his family and resumes his role as middle-class patriarch, but individualistic amorality triumphs over domesticity. And although Cross's preface to *Six Chapters* wryly presents this "terrible story of reckless transgression" as a "lesson" to humanity, the unmistakable message of Cross's novel is that the hypocrisy and socially regressive strictures of Victorian Society are to blame for Cecil and Theodora's fate. The subversive tone of these novels is achieved through their central characters' queerness. I read this queerness as an adaptive strategy, necessary for survival of a new species of masculinity in the changing ecosystem of imperial decline.

<9>The concept of queerness enables us to consider figures as occupying a third space between binary opposites. The Imperial Gothic context of *The Sign of the Spider* and *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* invite us to place the queerness of Laurence and Cecil under the lens of postcolonial theory. Queerness in this context recalls Homi Bhabha's formulation of "menace," his

identification of the uneasiness that arises when the colonizer sees himself reflected in the "mimicry" of the colonized Other ("Of Mimicry and Man"). In colonial literature, Revathi Krishnaswamy argues, "the white man emerges as a deeply divide figure whose authority is constantly being undermined by an enormous sense of failure or futility" (3). Krishnaswamy's claim echoes Bhabha's assertion that "the success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferations of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure" (Bhabha 127). The self depends on the other for its reification even as it primacy is threatened by its proximity to the other. Although the aim of the Gothic is to put the Other at a distance—usually ending, as Tabish Khair notes, "with the predictable destruction or containment of this Otherness" (6), the two remain inextricably, queerly linked. Khair's definition of Otherness, which also harks back to Bhabha's description of the sense of "menace" that arises when the Other "mimics" the Self, is particularly pertinent to the concept of queerness as it operates in *The Sign of the Spider* and *Six Chapters*. The late-Victorian world Laurence and Cecil inhabit is one in which a man's duty to uphold English propriety and the impulse to decadence and savagery—to "go native"—are constantly competing. But unlike typical Imperial Gothic heroes, Laurence and Cecil view Victorian society as barbaric and uncivilized. Laurence briefly rises to a position of wealth and influence among the Ba-gcatya people that he could never hope to attain in England, and is content to secure his position by marrying the king's niece Lindela until fortune turns against him. Cecil is thoroughly Orientalist, preferring the climate of the Middle East to dreary England and affecting to live like a native during his archaeological expeditions. However, neither of them can fully assimilate into the non-white cultures they have adopted and which have adopted them. They are what Krishnaswamy calls "anomalous figures" who do not fit comfortably into socially prescribed binaries of black/white, male/female and so on, thereby exposing "the fault lines of colonial ideology" (Krishnaswamy 3).

<10>Laurence Stanninghame is introduced as an active and virile man, who in spite of his masculine potential is "a man who has not made a good thing of life, and who can never for a moment lose sight of that fact" (6). He is unhappy in his marriage, financially depleted and unable to take the dominant role in his household. The bronzed appearance of his skin "told of a former life in the open—possibly under a warmer sun than that now playing upon it" (6). His travels in the Empire have apparently inscribed him in more ways than one. The permanent change in his skin color signifies the fundamental change to his character influenced by contact with the colonies, possibly rendering him unfit for his sanctioned role as Imperialist patriarch. In addition, frequent reference is made to his disordered "nerves," a characteristic associated with feminine hysteria. Mitford ascribes Laurence's physical evidence of degeneration to a life of failure, but also implicates the constraints of middle-class domesticity, which it seems has had a feminizing influence on him. To Laurence, "home, sweet home" is a

"faded old figment," while the "so-called holy and pure joys of the family circle" revered by Victorian society seem to him a "sort of Punch and Judy show at best" (8).

<11>Laurence's aversion to his domestic life is partially explained by the paradoxical position of the British gentleman, for whom the foreign frontier is a testing ground, but whose identity is threatened by too much exposure to foreign influence. Anne M. Windholz notes that in the changing economy of late Victorian Britain, "[…] emigration began to be seen as a solution to what might be termed 'redundant gentlemen,' much as it had earlier been seen as a solution to redundant women, troublesome Irishmen, and the urban poor" (635). Laurence typifies the "redundant gentleman"; although he projects middle-class respectability outwardly, he is in financial straits, and his suburban home life is described in all its shabbiness. Windholz explains that although the middle class origins of such men conferred upon them the nominal status of "gentleman," they did not enjoy the wealth—or moral permissibility—attendant to that designation. As a member of this category, Laurence feels entitled to the privileges of gentlemanly status but must abandon his family to seek a fortune in South Africa in order to realize them. Ironically, although he ultimately does return to England a wealthy man, he does not obtain his riches in the gold fields but through plunder and the capital crime of slave trading.

<12>Laurence's attitude toward life with his family is practically blasphemous for a Victorian man of his class. His queerness is further evident in his preference for his ethereally-named daughter Fay to his "two sturdy boys, combative of instinct and firm of tread," whose constant rough-housing "play[s] the devil with [his] nerves" (8). That he does not care for his unnamed sons whose masculine traits appear more normative indicates Laurence's withdrawal from conventional expectations. His attachment to Fay foreshadows his relationship with Lilith, the unconventional woman who will come to inscribe Laurence as her "ideal." In a subtle way, Mitford sets up the horror to follow by emphasizing Laurence's natural inclination away from conventional masculinity. Laurence is unstable as the center of his family—a microcosm of Victorian society—and his weakness allows for a stronger influence to take his place. The danger that Mitford hints at is that English masculinity may be supplanted by femininity or racial Otherness.

<13>In addition to Laurence's alignment with the feminine, he is also presented as being in danger of "going native." This becomes apparent as his connection to Hazon, the English gentleman turned savage by his time in Africa, develops. Hazon functions as the outward manifestation of Laurence's internalized Otherness; it is clear that he represents what Laurence could become if he stays long enough in Africa. Hazon's appearance is a queer doubling of Laurence's, with certain features intensified: "the bronze hue of his complexion, and of his sinewy hands, seemed to tell of a life of hardness and adventure; and the square jaw and

straight, piercing glance was that of a man who, when roused, would prove a resolute, relentless, and most dangerous enemy" (49). Hazon embodies ideal masculine characteristics, but inverted, for which reason he acquires the nick-name "Pirate Hazon." While he is steadfast, courageous, levelheaded, and physically powerful, he is also ruthless and amoral. Also, despite his rough exterior and violent character, Hazon is apparently a gentleman, in whom there is not "the faintest trace of provincialism or vulgarity" (52). Laurence recognizes Hazon's accent as indicative of an upper class upbringing, a fact that aligns them. "There is nothing so quick to betray to the sensitive ear any strain of plebian descent as the voice, and of this no one was more thoroughly aware than Laurence Stanninghame" (52). This passage demonstrates the instinctive sense of connection that arises between Laurence and Hazon. Despite the darkness lurking around Hazon's character, he and Laurence immediately establish a queer sympathy with one another, because they recognize in each other the ability to put aside conventional values and notions of morality for the sake of survival. Laurence reflects, "Duty? Hang duty! He had made a most ruinous muddle of his whole life through reverencing that fetish word…What had he ever gained by striving to improve upon the universal law? Nothing. Nothing good. Everything bad—bad and deteriorating—morally and physically" (61). Laurence's disdain for Victorian society's slavish adherence to "duty" at once reifies his alignment with Hazon, who has left Victorian propriety behind, but also implicates Victorian society itself as a degenerative force.

<14>Cecil Ray's remove from conventional English values is even more overt than Laurence Stanninghame's. He boasts of having a constitution naturally equipped for life in the Middle East, and he openly expresses his preference for the society of "natives" to English society. "Even in the full blaze of a Mesopotamian summer," he recounts, "I had kept my health, while the Europeans round me had sickened, fled, or died" (5). His "conversance with the languages of the East," and "known power for making myself popular with every class of the natives" helps him advance in his career as an Egyptologist (5). Having spent extensive time in the Arab world, he has acquired "a sympathy with the character and fashion of the Eastern" which has queered his relationship to his native England (6). There is a direct correlation between Cecil's taste for the exotic and his distaste not only for English society, but also with his sexual "appropriateness," which is also unconventional, and also reflected in his appearance. A persistent theme in Imperial Gothic fiction has to do with common perceptions of Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection. It was widely supposed that, "races like species either improve on earlier generations or the reverse—growing degenerate or increasingly 'unfit' in the 'struggle for existence'" (Brantlinger, *Victorian Studies* 46). For Cross, physical appearance reveals as much about a character's evolutionary "fitness" as his character. Cecil describes his own features as "rather white and seedy-looking, with a blue shade around the eyes, which I said was due to overwork and liver, and which my friends unkindly ascribed to dissipation. I suppose it must have been the regularity of the features and

the straightness of the lines that gave me the title to be called decent-looking" (9-10). The suggestion of dissipation points to Cecil's unfitness for the role of imperial patriarch that British men of his class are expected to assume. "Dissipation" also has homosexual connotations, hinting at Cecil's bisexuality, which becomes apparent as his relationship with Theodora develops. It is heavily implied that Cecil has taken both male and female lovers during his travels, and his passion for Theodora is cemented when she models the "Mohammedan garments" of an Arab man (evidently a former paramour's) that she has found in his collection of exotic souvenirs. That Cecil's bisexuality appears not to be innate but rather a preference his experiences in the East have inspired further emphasizes the threat the colonies pose to the perpetuation of the English race.

<15>Cecil refers directly to his evolutionary and racial deficiency when, while reflecting on his growing sexual attraction to Theodora, he recalls race theory put forward by Arthur Schopenhauer: (2)

> I laughed to myself as Schopenhauer's theory shot across me, that all impulse to love is merely the impulse of the genius of the genus to select a fitting object which will help in producing the Third Life. Certainly the genius of the genus in me was weaker than the genius of my own individuality here, for Theodora was as unfitted, according to the philosopher's views, to become a co-worker with me in carrying out nature's sole aim as she was fitted to give me as an individual the strongest personal pleasure. (57-58)

Cecil acknowledges that his own impulse to reproduce, and thus do his part to continue the English race, is deficient, and that his "individuality," his queer inclination to be attracted to Theodora—because of her masculine traits, her Oriental sympathies and her own evolutionary "unfitness"—exerts more influence over him. Cross, even more overtly than Mitford, sets up the threat to the primacy of traditional English masculinity in presenting Cecil as highly susceptible to the influence of gender and racial Otherness. Laurence Stanninghame is characteristically unfit to fulfill the role of English patriarch, but he must be given some credit for trying. Cecil Ray, on the other hand, is fundamentally incapable of producing offspring, let alone raising a family.

<16>While Laurence's double Hazon, upon whom his deficient masculinity is inscribed outwardly, remains separate from Laurence's sexual queerness, in *Six Chapters* Theodora takes on dual functions as the symbol of Cecil's queer sexuality, and as his double, the embodiment of his racially contaminated masculinity. Cecil's effeminacy is ascribed to his "Oriental" character, and Theodora is represented as his Orientalist sexual ideal, combining the physical characteristics of his Eastern (male and female) lovers he has captured in a sketchbook(3) from his travels, as well as in her "dash of virility" and "hint of dissipation" (43). Cecil comments frequently on her appearance, especially its ambiguous masculinity; her body shape and

attitude calls to mind "a young fellow of nineteen" (52) and later, disguised as a man, Theodora's "face and figure yielded completely to the character given them by the dress" (121). Particularly alluring to Cecil is the contrast between Theodora's sensuously feminine mouth, "a delicate curve of the brightest scarlet," and the "narrow, glossy, black line" of a slight moustache on her upper lip (13). "Such a peculiar half-male character invested the whole countenance," he recalls, "that I felt violently attracted to it merely from its peculiarity" (14). It is precisely her "peculiarity," or her gender queerness that attracts him and positions her as his double. He reiterates, "She was peculiar certainly in every way, and, contrary to the average Englishman, I liked peculiarity. And that intense nervous excitability…enlisted my sympathies; perhaps because my own nerves always seemed strung to an unnatural pitch" (31). Cecil recognizes the reflection of his own ambiguous nature in Theodora. It is significant that he comments on their shared "nervous excitability" (which Laurence also shares), as this is a typically feminine trait. In her role as his double, Theodora represents the extremes of Otherness within Cecil. However, it must be noted that what is unnatural about Cecil and Theodora's relationship is not their violation of gender norms or their disinclination to have children, but that they must conceal the true nature of their relationship from society. Cross certainly plays on late-Victorian fears of masculine women and effeminate men as indicating a trend of racial degeneracy, but the queerness of her characters do not represent the decline of the English race but instead point to the obsolescence of Victorian sexual mores. Although Cecil and Theodora's fate is tragic, their relationship contains the flicker of an ideal of sexual love that is not subject to the tyranny of reproductive duty.

<17>The idea that *Six Chapters* champions progressive sexual attitudes finds support in Decadent philosophy. William L. Svitavsky writes, "the Decadents held that the situation of their time was decline and ruin, the result of a natural cycle of social decay, and that the only hope of escape was through artifice and moral degeneracy—unnatural states and therefore superior to the essentially flawed condition of human nature" (1). This is consistent with passages in Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" that present an Aesthetic view of evolution:

> …I am certain that, as civilization progresses and we become more highly organized, the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and *will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched*. For life is terribly deficient in form […] By revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammeling burden of moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become, as it were, a warrant for the contemplative life. (35, 42, italics Wilde's)

I quote Wilde at length in order to demonstrate a contemporary precedent for what I am asserting is at play in Mitford and Cross's novels. Wilde's comments suggest that it does not

necessarily follow that because human life is subject to evolution, the aim of human life should be to ensure the survival of the race by rigid social controls regarding reproduction. Rather, the inevitability of evolution ought to free society from the obsession with policing sexuality. Svitavsky notes that Decadence is characterized by tension between the impulse to worldly pleasures and "a desire for something ideal, unworldly, eternal," and goes on to describe how this ideal can assume the form of a Nietzschean Overman,(4) which is often pitted against a racially degenerate antagonist (Svitavsky 3). Interestingly, the Decadent worldview and the ideals embodied in the Overman can be seen to coincide in Laurence and Cecil. Like the Overman, Laurence and Cecil eschew the stagnant values of Victorian society to forge individual morality. And both privilege passionate love for its own sake rather than as subordinate to the requirements of marriage and reproduction.

<18>What I am attempting to argue is that *The Sign of the Spider* and *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* show that Imperial Gothic is not always defined by the struggle of civilization against the forces of savagery, as Patrick Brantlinger's definitions suggest. Ardel Haefele-Thomas has pointed out that the Gothic provides a place "to explore the terrain of taboo sexual desires and gender identities…[as well as] ideals about race, interracial desire, cross-class relationships, ethnicity, empire, nation, and 'foreignness'" (3). A recent article by Bradley Deane demonstrates how Haefele-Thomas's assertions apply to the genre of "lost world" fiction (in which *The Sign of the Spider* must be included). According to Deane, in lost world fiction, "raw strength, courage, instinctive violence, bodily size, and homosocial commitment to other men" is privileged over traditional Victorian values and that homosocial appreciation for these characteristics frequently transcends race (206). As I have discussed, the expectations of ideal Victorian manhood require the man to uphold the role of patriarch—furthering the race and ensuring its survival. Laurence Stanninghame is a family man, but a deficient one, and he repudiates this identity to seek fortune and revitalized masculinity in Africa. Cecil Ray, on the other hand, refuses this role at the outset. He has no interest in conventional domesticity, and shuns reproductive sexuality. And yet he frames his desire for Theodora (as a woman both masculinized and Orientalized) in instinctual terms, hinting at a new, more permissive and progressive masculinity—progressive in part because of its fluidity, which is contrary to the rigid constraints of the Victorian ideal. The specter of miscegenation looms over the Victorian value of sexual restraint and the attendant value of racial purity. Hybridity, one of the determiners of evolutionary success, was seen not as an asset but as a threat to Victorian society. However, as Deane illustrates, cultural "cross dressing" can represent an acceptable, advantageous form of hybridity, as, for example, when the white heroes of Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* dress like Kukuana warriors to access higher forms of masculine valor.

<19>Cultural cross-dressing also permits homoerotic expression; but as Deane notes, "women mark the boundary of acceptable primitive heroism. But with their marginality strictly

enforced, manliness may be defined in a way that trumps racial difference" (211). When Theodora dresses as an Arab man, she appears to become akin to an Arab man, who, in Cecil's construction of Arab masculinity, is sexually permissive as well as physically imposing. However, when Theodora playfully assumes this role to provoke her would-be lover, she has no inkling of what her future holds: submitting to the violent sexual demands of the Arab men she impersonates. In this act her alignment with the Other goes too far for Cecil's taste, causing "every drop of Saxon blood" in his body to "turn into boiling lava with fury and revolted loathing and rage" (244). In a scene parallel to the earlier one when he is overwhelmed with a violent desire to possess Theodora, her obsequious capitulation to their Egyptian captors arouses in him a "savage, mindless, brutal lust to kill, this impulse which lies so closely curled round the roots of every lover's passion." "I longed to destroy her now," he goes on, "as I had once longed to possess her" (248). What he desires to kill is her kinship to Arab masculinity, and his inappropriate desire for it. She begs him to spare her and leave her to the Egyptian men. "Think what our life has been!" she pleads. "Cecil, you accepted me for your own desires as Theodora; you can't now for those same desires, turn me into a Lucretia!" (249). Significantly, what impels Cecil to his savage wish to kill Theodora and himself English propriety, an irony Theodora's pleading crystallizes. It is also important to note that this disastrous turn of events results from the attempt to conceal Theodora's gender. Although Cecil does take a certain amount of deviant pleasure in Theodora's cross dressing, the main reason she assumes male dress is so that they may go about freely together without exciting scandal, a move necessitated by social strictures.

<20>It should be noted that the distinctions between "primitive" man and tribal societies was frequently blurred in the Victorian imagination. H. Rider Haggard and Joseph Conrad (for example) undoubtedly characterize African tribal cultures as primeval, a throwback to an earlier stage of human development. Mitford also conceives of the mysterious Ba-gcatcya people as primitive, and this has significant implications for how Laurence is characterized in relation to them. The late Victorian interest in primitivism supports the idea that Laurence is not a "degenerate" subject, but rather represents the potential for savagery inherent in all men and suppressed by the hypocrisy and false morality of Victorian society.(5) Indeed, such latent savagery may translate into innovative individualism, as in Laurence's case. He must breach several social taboos to survive: abandoning his family, engaging in slave trading, intending to marry a black African woman, and, finally, desecrating the skeleton of one of his dead comrades to make a weapon to defend himself. If cultural taboos represent superstitious adherence to arbitrary custom, Laurence's willingness to break taboos to survive indicates his progressiveness rather than degeneracy. That Laurence's story ends with his passing the lore of the "queer things" he has encountered on to his daughter is telling.

<21>*The Sign of the Spider* ends with a look toward the future, signified by Laurence's perceptive daughter Fay, who is already betraying an affinity for queerness inherited from her father. While one could read Laurence's return to his family as the triumph of civilization over the forces of Otherness, the decidedly queer note on which the novel ends, which both Laurence and his daughter acknowledge with exactly that word, must be pointed out. The father-daughter vignette which is the book's final scene suggests that the racial queerness Laurence has acquired during his adventures will be transferred, along with the wealth he accumulated as an "ivory trader," to Fay. "How do people get rich in Africa, father?" Fay asks, to which he replies evasively, "they trade in all sorts of things—ivory, and so forth" (233). He reflects:

> Every conventionality violated, every rule of morality, each set aside, had brought him nothing but good—had brought nothing but good to him and his. Had he grovelled on in humdrum poverty-stricken respectability, what would have befallen him—and them?...At this stage an impulse moved him, and opening a locked cabinet he took forth something, and as he examined the associations of the thing, and the fast darkening room, brought him back the vision of glooming rock walls and a perfectly defenceless man weighed down with horror and dread. (234)

What Laurence withdraws from the cabinet is the gruesome makeshift club fashioned of the Arab's bone, which he then shows to Fay. "Queer sort of weapon, isn't it?" he remarks sardonically. He does not tell Fay the history of the club, only revealing that he "put the thing together when I had no other weapon—ay—and used it, too, in the ghastliest kind of fighting I ever was in" (235). Fay, undeterred by his reticence to share the whole story with her, demands, "show me some more queer things" (235). Fay's interest in the outward symbols of her father's internalized queerness suggests that the impulse to Otherness has not been conquered, but is instead transferred to the succeeding generation. Mitford unambiguously suggests that Victorian "duty" and propriety have become obsolete, along with the patriarchal-imperialist masculine ideal. The conclusion of *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* echoes Mitford's view; Cross presents English society as a corroding influence that, in severely punishing nonconformity, brings about its own destabilization. The brief preface with which Cross introduces the novel calls its "pages from a human life" the record of "reckless transgression and its punishment," which she offers as "a lasting protest against all egoism, all love of love for the sake of pleasure to the lover." While on the surface it appears that Cross indicts Cecil for his selfish and decadent attraction to Theodora, and implicitly admonish his failings as an Englishman, ultimately she condemns a society that cannot conceive of and will not tolerate a love that exists for a purpose other than to further the English race. Although Laurence and Cecil are not conventional heroes by any means, they represent attempts at progress toward a

new vision of society, and this progress is achieved through the space for exploration and adaptation queerness provides.

Endnotes

(1)Victoria Cross was the pen name most frequently used by the prolific popular writer Annie Sophie Cory. Cory was born in 1868 in Rawalpindi; she spent her early life in India.   Her father was an officer in the Indian Army and was involved in the *Civil and Military Gazette* at which Rudyard Kipling got his start as a journalist. (Knapp 80) Although *Six Chapters of a Man's Life*was her fifth published novel, a chapter of it appeared as "Theodora" in the *Yellow Book* in 1895. According to Charlotte Mitchell, the entire novel was completed by 1894 but was deemed too provocative to be published at that time. (Mitchell, "Victoria Cross")(^)

(2)The argument to which Cecil alludes is found in the essay "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love," from the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, in which Schopenhauer asserts that "all amorousness is rooted in the sexual impulse alone," and that, in turn, the sexual impulse is driven by the "will-to-live":

> [W]hat ultimately draws two individuals of different sex exclusively to each other with such power is the will-to-live which manifests itself in the whole species, and here anticipates, in the individual that these two can produce, an objectification of its true nature corresponding to its aims. (536)

The World as Will and Representation predates Darwin's theory of evolution by a wide margin, but Cecil's understanding of Schopenhauer is filtered through a post-Darwinian worldview. Although Schopenhauer could not have conceived of "instinct" in evolutionary terms, the popular discourse of evolution in late Victorian England—social Darwinism in particular—gives new significance to his claims. His discussion of sexuality as reproductive impulse anticipates the mischaracterization of natural selection as the "survival of the fittest."(^)

(3)Two of the drawings in Cecil's sketchbook are described in detail: the first is of a Sikh man provocatively displaying his unbound hair, which is so long he must lift it to keep it off the ground. By comparison, Theodora's hair is neither as long nor as luxuriant, although as Cecil remarks it is of "a marvelous length for a European" (70). The second drawing mentioned is of a Persian woman, in comparison to whom Theodora is also found lacking: "Her face was not one-tenth so handsome as the mere shadowed inanimate representation of the Persian's beneath our hands" (72). The latter is unambiguously presented as Cecil's past lover, while the relationship between Cecil and the former is less clear; according to Cecil, the man agreed to be

drawn with his hair down in exchange for a bribe. However, unmistakable eroticism suffuses both the drawing itself as well as Cecil and Theodora's discussion of it.(**^**)

(4)See *Epistemology of the Closet* for a rigorous discussion of the unexpected queer linkages between Wilde and Nietzsche's philosophy.(**^**)

(5)For an in-depth discussion, see Richard Pearson, "Primitive Modernity: H.G. Wells and the Prehistoric Man of the 1890s."(**^**)

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