

A Critical Reassessment of Gender in John Buchan's *Prester John*

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John Buchan's *Prester John*¹ (1910) is a novel which occupies an ambiguous position in the imperial canon. It has hitherto been noted for its enduring qualities as a boys' adventure story and as a narrative involved explicitly within the British imperial discourse of its time, which can be regarded as spanning the debate initiated by the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), its temporary resolution in the passing of the Union of South Africa Act (1909), and its implementation, which coincided in 1910 with the first publication of the novel.

Matching the period within which it was written, the novel is imbued with the masculine ethos of triumphant imperial military endeavours in addition to those of the ongoing colonial-economic enterprise. Perhaps as a result of these "given" qualities, *Prester John* has long enjoyed a tendency to merge imperceptibly into the traditional canon of both British and, more particularly, South African English fiction, while at the same time undergoing subjection to relatively diffuse criticism. Hence, in recent years the novel has been used in an attempted critical re-construction of the literary-spiritual ego (cf Alan Sandison²); in an attempted rehabilitation of Buchan as a canon-worthy author (cf David Daniell³); and in the

¹ John Buchan, *Prester John* (1910. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956). This edition is used for all references.

² Alan Sandison, *The Wheel of Empire: A Study of the Imperial Idea in Some Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1967). Sandison views the major part of imperial fiction (with the notable exception of Haggard's) as "moral" rather than "political," since "achievement and reality lie in the *process* of action itself since it alone can secure man his identity and integrity. Thus the imperial idea becomes not an end in itself but a major expression of the problems of self-consciousness" (viii). Sandison's "Empire" has been succinctly described by Wendy R. Katz as "a cumbersome historical burden somewhat arbitrarily grafted atop a unique and apolitical vision" (*Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire* 3-4).

³ David Daniell's "Buchan and 'The Black General'" (1985) is both provocative and thoroughly disappointing as criticism. He provides a valuable analysis of the boys' magazine serialization of *Prester John* under the title of "The Black General," which appeared at roughly the same time as the full novel in 1910, but he fails, firstly, to establish to any satisfactory degree the identity (or anonymity) of the person responsible for its abridgement and, as Daniell revealingly analyses, its bowdlerization. He relies rather on the speculative: "I have not been able to discover whether these [alterations] had John Buchan's permission: the evidence points clearly to him not being the reviser" (136). Secondly, Daniell attempts, often ahistorically, a defence of Buchan on the basis of Buchan's apparent "sensitivity" in contrast to the demonstrably cruder jingoism of the serialized version and also, presumably, of its youthful readership ("Buchan's empire ideas are ... unusual for

pursuit of texts unsuitable for children (cf Brian Street⁴). At a more pertinent level, Tim Couzens (as I will mention again below) has tried to trace the novel's ideology in its use of landscapes, while Paul Rich has related it in detail to its imperial-historical context. Most notably, Stephen Gray has traced, especially by means of Freudianesque exegesis, its influence on the development of a whole literary genre, the South African novel.

While the present paper contributes inevitably to the critical kaleidoscope, it will attempt to re-examine the function of the novel as an effective piece of imperial discourse, through focussing on aspects of land, race and, in particular, gender as they appear, or fail to appear, both in the text and in earlier criticism of the text.

Set in the years immediately after the prolongation of the Anglo-Boer War, *Prester John* is the story of David Crawfurd, the son of a Scottish presbyterian minister, who, after his father's death and the genteel impoverishment of his family, is sent through his uncle's agency to seek his fortune by working as assistant storekeeper at one of a chain of "half the stores in South Africa" (11); Crawfurd has, though, the prospect of gaining the management of a store of his "own" after acquiring experience.

Crawfurd's youth, and the modesty of his position, permits Buchan to present the first-person narration of the story as a process of discovery, learning and maturation. (While other autobiographical parallels may be considered tenuous, Buchan's secretaryship to Lord Milner, together with his travels within South Africa and the relative freshness of his observing eye, may perhaps be seen as influential on the general tone of *Prester John*, although Crawfurd, as a nineteen-year old "lad," is younger by six or seven years than his creator was in 1901 at the start of his work as an administrator in South Africa.) After arriving at the trading store at Blaauwildebtefontein, a "haven of green" (33) in the Zoutpansberg, a remote corner of the Northern Transvaal, Crawfurd discovers that the "Kaffirs" are trading in illicit diamonds with the corrupt storekeeper, Japp, and using the money to fund preparations for a general uprising against the white

the time" [137]). In a way analogous to Sandison's, Daniell's analysis, which relies on the crude contrast between the full *Prester John* text and its bowdlerized "Black General" version, is in constant danger of the latter forcing its critic back into the imperial discourse of the former. Daniell's earlier, more extensive study of Buchan, *The Interpreter's House* (1975), which contains only brief reference to "The Black General," confirms this impression.

⁴ Brian Street, "Reading the Novels of Empire: Race and Ideology in the Classic 'Tale of Adventure'" (1985). Street argues that since boys' imperial adventure stories like *Prester John* "can no longer be read 'straight' as 'children's' books" without re-invoking the original, now fossilized imperial "conceptual framework," they should undergo "official" re-classification which would justify transfer "to the adult section of the library" (107). In this connection, it would seem noteworthy that *Prester John* is currently published in the main Penguin paperback format rather than in one of the Penguin imprints for young children or adolescents. The novel would appear to have "grown up" in terms of (the publisher's perception of) its modern reception, or perhaps to have outgrown successive generations of juvenile readerships which no longer recognize the imperial structures underpinning its logic.

administration. In terms of the individualized particularity of the story, Crawford's task as hero -- apart from achieving "manhood" and wealth, which appear to function synonymously here -- is to intervene sufficiently to ensure the failure of the black rebellion. In doing so, rather than trusting the judgments of his white elders and superiors, he uses his own analysis of the black warriors' strategy, especially that of John Laputa, the charismatic pagan-Christian leader of the uprising who has attempted to exploit the inspirational fifteenth-century legend of "Prester John," purported Christian priest and king of the Ethiopians, a focal point for the African identity.⁵ Crawford risks his own life, but eventually -- and inevitably -- supervises personally the suicide of Laputa, before extracting himself under impossible odds from the insurrectionists' hiding place, an almost inaccessible cavern in the hills, and bringing news of the uprising to the British imperial forces.

Crawford's personal reward is to inherit the wealth of Africa from the African, in the form of gold coinage (in both the Transvaal and also several European currencies) and precious stones accumulated as the "war chest of a king" (179). In doing so, he assumes also the role and "duty" (198) of the white man in Africa: not as "king" -- Laputa himself has declared that "there will be no more kings in Africa" (178), and the sacred symbol of African kingship has already been profaned by Crawford placing the ancient necklace of Prester John around his own neck (129) -- but as economic man, the treasure functioning, in Laputa's contemptuous words, as the "hoard of a trader" (179). With Crawford's uncle's original twenty-sovereign investment in the hero having yielded a profit, after the Crown's extraction its legal share, of "a trifle over a quarter of a million pounds" (200), the novel ends with the hero withdrawing from Africa to his homeland, where he intends investing his wealth in a solid bourgeois education at "Edinburgh College" (201) and in securing a comfortable future for his mother.

It is left to another, more permanent settler, to discover and exploit commercially the source of Laputa's diamonds: "A Kaffir tribe... had known of it, but they had never worked it, but only collected the overspill" (201-202), some of the profits of which are re-invested in the colonial enterprise by the establishment "at Blaauwildebeestefontein itself of a great native training college. It was no factory for making missionaries and black teachers, but an institution for giving the Kaffirs the kind of training which fits them to be good citizens of the state" (202).

The novel has, then, an explicitly "imperial" agenda which its contemporary readership could identify, and perhaps also identify with: that a young British man could both prove and improve himself through "going out" to the colonies to acquire personal and material benefits. As I have already indicated, generalized biographical parallels may perhaps be drawn between the fictional hero and Buchan himself, though Buchan's own career was altogether grander in style and

⁵ Tim Couzen's "The Old Africa of a Boy's Dream" provides a detailed collation of information on the "Ethiopian" Church in South Africa and its relation to black resistance.

achievement. Perth (Scotland)-born (in 1875), manse-bred, and Glasgow- and Oxford-educated, near the end of the Anglo-Boer War Buchan, as a twenty-six year old, "accepted the invitation of Lord Milner, High Commissioner for South Africa, to return with him as private secretary and assist in the task of rebuilding the administration,"⁶ a task which, from October 1901 until August 1903, he performed from within the "Milner Kindergarten," a conservative pressure group supporting white African settlement within a multi-racial Commonwealth. As an imperial administrator, Buchan was active, and gained a considerable familiarity with the physical and socio-political geography of the country.

The identification of John Buchan as British and as imperial administrator (the peak of his many achievements was to become the governor-general of Canada from 1935 until his death in 1940, the formal representative of the British Crown in the Dominion) is important, but to these qualifications must be added his lay devotion to spiritual matters, which led from the strict Calvinism of his childhood -- his father was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland -- to the eventual high post of Lord High Commissioner to the Assembly of the less-strictly Calvinistic, and established Church of Scotland (1933-34).

Amidst all this he became also a highly prolific writer: novelist (twenty-six volumes),⁷ short story writer, *Times* correspondent, historian, biographer and autobiographer (*Memory Hold-the-Door* [1940]); Harry Blamires's assessment of Buchan's portrayal of the First World War in his espionage novels *Greenmantle* (1916) and *Mr Standfast* (1919) might to some extent summarize Buchan himself: "It is an organized, directed business whose individual events contribute to a vast pattern. The world map is spread out in the writer's mind."⁸

According to Stephen Gray, John Buchan's *Prester John* (1910) appeared at a transitional point in time, both historically and in relation to imperial fiction:

Buchan senses his role as chronicler is of the last stages of the "opening up" of the dark continent and of the battle between the colonizer and the indigenous population. His concern is to let his novel be the summation of a wave of history which, after *Prester John*, was to take a new direction. Thus, *Prester John* is, in effect, the genre's crowning achievement, and its ending. (*Introduction* 128)

The principal imperial-political components underlying the novel have been summarized by the historian, Paul Rich, both in his literary criticism and in his analysis of the "intellectual history" of British imperial thought of the past century. Firstly, Rich's description of the socio-economic conditions pertaining in South Africa at the time of Buchan's stay from 1901 to 1903 suggests a time of intense public interest in aspects of the insecurity of the British South African colonies, as yet unbound in the formal constitution of the Union of South Africa:

⁶ Harry Blamires, "Buchan, John" 41.

⁷ Daniell notes that *Prester John* was Buchan's "nineteenth book" ("Black General" 146).

⁸ Blamires 41.

The process of rapid proletarianisation on the Witwatersrand and at Kimberley [the mythopoeic sites of so much subsequent popular fiction by South African writers] had already led to a partial breakdown of more traditional modes of social control through tribal chiefs. ... The fears of a united black uprising led by American-educated black preachers exerted a powerful hold on the white settler imagination in South Africa in the early years of the century and were graphically depicted by ... John Buchan ... in his popular story, *Prester John*.⁹

Updating Buchan's personal experience of South Africa from 1901-1903, Rich elsewhere suggests that

by the time Buchan was writing [i.e. prior to publication in 1910] a coherent attempt was being made to establish a white settler state in South Africa with a coherent "native policy" governed by precepts of racial "segregation." ... In an age of growing racial solidarity between Boer and Briton, the main enemy was increasingly being seen as the African population, especially in so far as it could become united.¹⁰

Re-inserted into its history, *Prester John* reveals a number of additional agendas related to the decade. Before writing the novel, Buchan had, in writer's terms, invested considerably in his concern for the British imperial involvement in South Africa: *The African Colony: Studies in the Reconstruction* (1903) debates Western responsibilities in the Dark Continent; and British expansionism is the theme of another novel with élite "intellectual" dimensions, *A Lodge in the Wilderness* (1907). *Prester John*, therefore, presents a battery of imperial wish-fulfillments: David Crawfurd, the white British colonialist settler (despite his only temporary residence), participates successfully, though not wholeheartedly, in destroying the last African aspiration to black unity and black resistance to white intrusion. He witnesses the defeat, humiliation and death of the "last" African king, and also the irretrievable loss of the symbol of Prester John's "Ethiopian" kingship, the fetishistic collar of rubies and gold. The imperial trader, represented by Crawfurd, then returns to his homeland with his new-found wealth, which, in the tradition of romance, has come to him "like fairy gold out of the *void*" (200, my emphasis) of Africa.

Having conclusively deprived the "Kaffir" of his own historical identity and heritage, at the end of the novel Buchan's hero exercises his power as an economic imperialist by withdrawing from the colonial scene, since from that moment he participates only as an outsider and observer. Functioning finally as mediator of the imperial vision to the reader, Crawfurd identifies the white settler's duty (Buchan does not here take up Kipling's image of the "burden" lexically though it is present in spirit) as that of facilitating the mediation of the secular values of

⁹ Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* 55-56.

¹⁰ Paul Rich, "Romance and the Development of the South African Novel" 125-26.

"civilization" in the form of an educational re-training of the black in white ways - of farming and agriculture-based manufacturing -- which will help them to become "good citizens of the state" (202).

Buchan can, then, be seen in both biographical and literary terms as having worked primarily within an ideological context which was, in a vaguely-defined manner, *humanely* "imperial," an ideology that was increasingly prevalent in Britain at the time. But in the division of land into black space and white, and in his advocacy of targeted education for the "Kaffir," Buchan's vision functions remarkably well as a blueprint for the future. As Malvern van Wyk Smith suggests, the provision at the end of the novel of the educational institution "confirms South Africa's commercial, industrial and Verwoerdian future" (30); more bluntly, in Stephen Gray's telling phrase: "In Buchan [in contrast to the earlier Rider Haggard] the flag is there to stay... [T]he white men have prevailed."¹¹

The travellers' tale -- of which genre *Prester John* is also representative -- of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and on into the twentieth, functions as a source of explanation for and an inscription of the bringing of familiar systems of order and reason and "civilization" into the "darker" recesses of the "unknown" world. In a concrete, geophysical sense this has been recognized by Tim Couzens in his tentative analysis of the novel in terms of its landscapes and their narrative structuration.¹² He relates the novel convincingly to the physical, rural geography of Buchan's experience of South Africa and to Buchan's fictional presentation of the white colonisation of African land. In this process, Couzens indicates the novelist's idealization of white settler space in stark contrast to that of the land still occupied by the African hordes. The history of the "land," and hence the economic power which it both conceals and represents, functions, therefore, for Couzens as a way into the ideological function of the colonial text. It is, however, an approach which he has found only partially successful for coming to terms with *Prester John*.

Interestingly, in an almost casual aside, Couzens also adds that the novel is "vigorously all-male" ("Old Africa" 10), a remark accurate enough in terms of the novel's action and ethos, but patently erroneous at both the level of plot and even more so of narrative substructure. Then at the end of the article, Couzens manages simultaneously to remedy and to compound his error by commenting that "the only woman mentioned in the book is his [the hero's] mother," unintentionally ignoring, among others, an already marginal character, the hero's African servant-"girl," Zeeta. At the same time, he also ignores the potential of another critical approach which might have emerged from the continuation of his own statement:

¹¹ Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature* 128.

¹² My source is the second publication of Couzens's article, which varies little from first to (presumably) revised version; see Tim Couzens, "The Africa of a Boy's Dream: Towards Interpreting *Prester John*" (*African Perspective* 13 [1979]) versus Tim Couzens, "'The Old Africa of a Boy's Dream' -- Towards Interpreting Buchan's *Prester John*" (*English Studies in Africa* 24.1 [1981]: 1-24).

"The only woman mentioned in the book is his mother -- *unless the Empire counts as his mistress*" (23, my emphasis).

For Buchan, as for so many writers and readers of adventure-thrillers, most particularly those of empire, the maintenance of the "unknown" is the ultimate peril, the threat posed by disorder, subterfuge, rebellion, conspiracy; by the breakdown of empire; by the uncompleted, inconsistent text. Traditionally, each has to be restored to order for a satisfactory closure of the text. In the case of *Prester John*, one of the major "unknowns" is undoubtedly the "feminine." Although women were necessary sexually and domestically, "the place of women in the colonies was carefully defined and circumscribed within what was an avowedly masculine enterprise" (Driver 6). If Northrop Frye's concept of "kidnapped" romance holds true, whereby romance is absorbed "into the ideology of an ascendant class" (57), then the feminine plays a leading role as hostage in the imperial romance, as Rich has also implied: "in its strictest form, the romantic ideal can have no place for the autonomy of feminine mind which has an ambiguous and ultimately threatening status" (*Romance and the South African Novel* 124).¹³

Where *Prester John* (and many of its Victorian forerunners) ostensibly differs to a major extent from the vast majority of the "colonial" novels which continue both to be read and to be written in the twentieth century lies in its nature as a novel produced for an *adolescent* male audience. Its hero, David Crawford, is a schoolboy whose graduation from childhood to manhood is intensified by the untimely death of his father. He is forced, therefore, to acquire not only the skills normally associated with earning a living but also with providing economically for his mother. (The responsibility for both of these tasks is temporarily assumed by an uncle who functions as financial facilitator, remaining emotionally remote in conventional familial terms.) The elements of Crawford's character which undergo change during this process of self-assertion within the imperial context are, as Gray (130-132) and Daniell (140) have pointed out, precisely his emotional and physical vulnerability, and his personal and social immaturity, which by the end of the novel have been handsomely compensated by his imperial-economic success in his temporary African location.

¹³ As might be expected, there would appear to be a considerable overlap of feminist "interests" between the imperial novel and the American Western. Jane Tompkins's summary (in "West of Everything") of the qualities of the latter is useful, especially in its identification of links between Christianity, masculinity, and the suppression of the feminine (Daniell draws attention to Crawford's inability to refute Laputa's criticisms of the neglect by "civilization" of Christianity): "the Western is secular, positivist and anti-feminist; it focuses on conflict in the public space, is obsessed by death and worships the phallus... It is a narrative of male violence" (14). Its focus on death she identifies as "a consequence of the Western's rejection of Christianity" (17). According to Tompkins, this rejection has been motivated by the Western's struggle to "get rid of Christianity's enormous cultural weight" (17), which, under the guardianship of women, has threatened to suppress the "manhood" of the American man, identifiable ("obviously") in his control of the gun/penis. Analogies with subsequent adventure novels on South Africa may also be fruitful.

If one accepts, therefore, that the power and romantic fantasy of empire was overwhelmingly "masculine" (cf also Rich's, and many other, studies of the dominance of -- male -- physical violence in the imperial enterprise; recent South African feminist studies such as Dorothy Driver's insist emphatically on the same), as a political novel, *Prester John* re-asserts not simply the dominance of the imperial vision but also the essential masculinity/*non-femininity* of that vision; and as an imperial literary text, it re-asserts the essential masculinity/*non-femininity* of the processes of selecting and defining the sources of power (and hence also of the processes of non-selecting and non-defining).

As both Gray and Daniell also indicate, the boys' imperial adventure novel, of which *Prester John* remains a pre-eminent specimen, functions predominantly as an assertion and celebration of a solidly established imperial "*rite de passage*" (Gray 111; Daniell ["rite of passage"] 139). As such, it celebrates a sequence of acts aimed at the completion of a (at the level of plot, primarily economic) quest, one which can be regarded, both anthropologically and literarily, as a delicate displacement of what is, in many cultures, an explicitly phallogocentric ritual, a masculine rite whose mysteries pass from male generation to male generation, and one which, being sanctioned by (patriarchal) society, is also, ideally, entirely predictable in its course.

Recurrently, where character functions metonymically for imperial Britain and for the colonized "Africa," we see the contradictions which tear apart the ideology upon which Buchan has based the logic of the novel. The inherent rift develops primarily in the character of Crawford. Far from home, and in the midst of darkest Africa, from whom can he acquire the requisite knowledge for initiation into the masculine world of adulthood and of empire? As a non-mature, non-initiated youth of the imperial "tribe," he suffers a deprivation which centres on his lack of a father. In Scotland he has been both fascinated and repelled by Laputa's dual nature (Christian/pagan; pagan/Christian), but in Africa, with misgivings, he begins to identify the "traditional" qualities of paternal wisdom in the African, whose skills as a politico-spiritual priest and leader are strongly projected throughout the novel. Laputa is personally attractive, in a Europeanized way: "The nose was high-bridged, and the lines of the mouth sharp and firm" (16) and "his voice was the most wonderful thing that ever came out of human mouth. It was full and rich, and gentle, with the tones of a great organ" (25). At the same time, as Daniell has noted, there is much that is "feminine" that is associated with Laputa: "exotic jewellery, fabulous queenship [Sheba is projected as ancestral possessor of the regal necklace], and buried wealth" (*Interpreter's House* 111). Additionally, late in the novel, in the midst of conflict, Crawford sees in Laputa all of the qualities that might be stereotypical of an idealized father-son relationship: "he became a friendly and rational companion. He kept his horse at an easy walk, and talked to me as if we were two friends out for a trip together" (151).

But he is black.

"If he had been white [suggests another, minor 'paternal' guide of Crawford's, Captain Arcoll] he might have been a second Napoleon. He is a born leader of men, and as brave as a lion. There is no villainy he would not do if necessary, and yet I should hesitate to call him a blackguard... [I]t is God's curse that he has been born among the children of Ham" (79).

Crawford, therefore, is obliged to nurture his burgeoning imperial masculinity in an altogether more extreme manner. The ambiguity and bi-directionality of sentiment placed in Captain Arcoll's paternalistic mouth functions primarily as a sign-post. Laputa cannot act as Crawford's guide into maturity since he is loaded with ambiguity: Christian, but pagan; civilized, but savage; male, but (femininely) sensitive; a black threat to the order of white Africa. For the young imperialist, the only possible father and guide from youth into manhood is the imperial abstraction, the idea of empire, embodied here in its patriarchal representatives, the military (Arcoll), the indoctrinator (Wardlaw, a schoolteacher who eventually heads the college for Africans), and the economic exploiter (Aitken, who discovers the main source of Laputa's diamonds), each inextricably linked with the others.

In its role as imperial initiation manual, *Prester John* remains true to its function. Maturity rituals, especially the essentially phallogocentric, demand an exclusion of the feminine, celebrate the endurance of suffering, and conclude with the reward of acceptance within the adult world. Hence, David Crawford undergoes exclusion from the shelter of his childhood home and a distancing from the weakness of the "feminine" (represented in his widowed and impoverished mother). Male awareness of the sexually feminine is intentionally suppressed: for the economically-unsecured pre-adult, Crawford, courtship and marriage remain non-text, and for the contemporary juvenile male reader, no feminine distractor can be included, since his attention is to be focussed upon the imperial idea.

Couzens is right -- for Crawford, the reader and Couzens, there is no other woman in the novel than Crawford's mother, whose maternal status bears no vestige of sexuality, which is suppressed by convention, age and familial proximity. Other female characters -- Zeeta the servant, "a little native girl" (34); Majinje the chieftainess, "a little girl whom no one was allowed to see" (40); the historical Queen of Sheba; and an anonymous (African?) "slattern" hired by Japp (54) -- all suffer a virtual exclusion for being not only "feminine" but also "African."¹⁴

¹⁴ Couzens cannot be left isolated in his critical oversight; Daniell, for instance, also asserts of Buchan that "two of his best books, *Prester John* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, have no women in them at all" (*Interpreter's House* 85). It should also be emphasised that, when Couzens insists that the novel is "vigorously all-male," he is focussing on historical, rather than fictional, aspects of the feminine which Buchan "may have chosen to exclude" (10).

Though marginalised by both the text and its critics, Zeeta, especially, features with comparative frequency in the text. Crawfurd soon establishes an easy relationship with her, discovering an unexpected range of skills in the African: "'Baas,' she said in very good English... The child had been well trained somewhere" (34).¹⁵ He chivalrously rescues her from Japp's drunken brutality (36-37), receives a bowl of mealie porridge from her before retiring to bed (35), and his room is "fresh and clean from Zeeta's care" (52), services which he is loath to lose when he moves out of Japp's quarters: "I carried Zeeta with me, being ashamed to leave her at the mercy of the old bully" (54); unruffled by the war-drums of Laputa's uprising, she continues to serve him coffee (64), and on his return from betraying the rebellion, "there was Zeeta cleaning up the place as if war had never been heard of" (193). Creeping out from between the realistic cracks in the masculine romantic construct, Zeeta functions, stereotypically, as an "ideal" cross between the kind of caring mother and devoted wife who sends her man off to war and receives him home again thereafter -- but also, historically, as an unexceptional servant, necessarily asexual in her "girlhood" and her (suppressed) Africanness, a textually neutered, totally racialized yet ostensibly raceless source of feminine domestic comfort whose familiarity/familiarity is remarkable only for its absence in Couzens's (liberal, white, South African, masculine) critical text.

Herein lies the peculiar success of *Prester John*. Buchan overwhelms our ideological quibbles by the confirmation of white hegemony over the land, at the same time as "kidnapping" into romantic bondage not merely the feminine (Zeeta) but also the quasi-feminine (both Laputa in his "sensitive" mode and, more particularly, the unblooded, vulnerable, virginal youth, Crawfurd, the focal point for the fantasies of uncountable youthful readers!). He has attempted, not without success considering the continued popularity of the novel, to blend the ritual processes of maturation with the dogma of economic imperialism within a frame of masculinist romance.

Stephen Gray has suggested (in exuberant style) that from a literary perspective *Prester John* seems to mark the end of the line:

In *King Solomon's Mines* Haggard contrived to leave the treasure chest of all Africa buried under a mountain the size of Sheba's breasts, which in turn left the reader with the promise of suckling on further romance. But in Buchan the body of romance is given its hysterectomy, as it were; Crawfurd dynamites into smithereens the cave that was his entry into manhood, and he has no compunction about hocking everything but the most sacred of the "fetiches" in which all of Africa's power is (supposedly) invested. Just as the novel itself goes past the normal resolution in the

¹⁵ I have "doctored" this quotation. The original, however, points up the proximity of the associations conveyed by my abbreviated version: "This is your room, *Baas*," she said in very good English in reply to my question. *The child had been well trained somewhere*, for there was a cracked dish full of oleander blossom on the drawers'-head, and the pillow-slips on the bed were as clean as I could wish. (34, my emphases)

genre into a general pamphleteering about how to pull the savage through into civilization, so Buchan takes the romance reader to his last threshold.¹⁶

Equally, though, it is arguable that Buchan's "clean-limbed, speedy, breathless"¹⁷ story remains an imaginative manual of empire-craft, a historical curiosity in the political specifics it fossilizes, but potent still in its rejection of alternative perspectives of land, race, and gender.

¹⁶ Gray, *Southern African Literature* 131.

¹⁷ Daniell's slight misquotation of a comment of T. E. Lawrence's made in 1933 on Buchan's writing, in a letter to Edward Garnett. Lawrence went on to suggest that "for our age they mean nothing: they are sport only: but will a century hence disinter them and proclaim him the great romancer of our blind and undeserving generation?" (*Interpreter's House* 1). Lawrence's speculation has struck a succession of critics as significant: it appears also in Martin Green's *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (1980) 323, who in turn quotes it from Colin Watson's influential *Snobbery with Violence* (1971) 43.

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