Feminist and Gender Approaches to Heart of Darkness


A FEMINIST AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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“Too Beautiful Altogether”: Ideologies of Gender and Empire in Heart of Darkness

...what [men] have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a “dark continent” to penetrate and to “pacify.”

—HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

A story about manly adventure narrated and written by men, Heart of Darkness might seem an unpropitious subject for feminist criticism. As my epigraph suggests, however, two colonizing ideologies operate in Conrad’s story, and a feminist reading can interrogate these interrelated ideologies of gender and empire. To do such a reading is to engage in a feminist critique of ideology, for “feminist thinking is really rethinking, an examination of the way certain assumptions about women and the female character enter into the fundamental assumptions that organize all our thinking” (Jehlen 189). Such rethinking about Heart of Darkness reveals collusive imperatives of empire and gender: Marlow’s narrative aims to “colonize” and “pacify” both savage darkness and women. By silencing the native laundress and symbolizing the equally silent savage woman and the Company women, Marlow reconstructs his experience of the darkness they stand for. The story’s two speaking

1The terms “savage” and “native” belong in quotation marks, to indicate their ideological valence. I have decided against this typographical awkwardness, but I ask the reader to remember the imperialist presuppositions behind these words.
European women, Marlow’s aunt and Kurtz’s Intended, perform a similar function. By restricting unsatisfactory feminine versions of imperialist ideology to them, Marlow is able to create his own masculine version to keep the darkness at bay.

In what follows I use “ideology” in two senses, to mean not only a conscious system of meaning, either imposed or willingly adopted, but also the unconscious grounding of individual experience. In the first sense, ideology refers to the processes whereby “meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed” (Barrett 73). An ideology works to construct a unified and consensual meaning for contradictory experiences and perceptions, by mystifying or disguising such contradictions. Ideologies often achieve this mystification by disguising customary social systems as natural relations; cultural systems in which one nation or gender is dominant over another, for instance, are represented as the natural order. It is through this guise of “the natural” that the second sense of ideology operates. Because we take for granted what is “natural,” an ideology becomes the unexamined ground of experience, “the very condition of our experience of the world” (Belsey 5). Thus internalized, ideology becomes cultural practice, the way we live. Because it is practice, however, it does not remain static. As our experiences and formulations of what is “natural” shift, ideology must continually be “renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” (Williams 112). And in the course of such modifications, an ideology’s contradictions may become visible.

To specify how ideological contradictions become visible in a literary text, the concept of discourse is helpful. A discourse is “a domain of language-use” (Belsey 5), a specific mode of speaking, writing, and thinking that includes certain shared assumptions. But a discourse is not simply a system of signs with a fixed content and modes of representation; rather it is a set of practices that “construct the objects of which they speak” (Humphries 108; emphasis added). In this sense, an ideology may be “inscribed in discourse” (Belsey 5); an ideology of gender or empire, for instance, is written into a term like “feminine” or “savage.” Now, a literary text creates its own discourse, but this discourse is not independent of others, for “the language of ideology” (Belsey 107) is the literary text’s “raw material.” And like ideologies, discourses are “not natural and inevitable” (During 35) but “historical, provisional and open to change.” Hence a literary text can “indicate the bounds within which particular meanings are constructed and negotiated in a given social formation” (Barrett 81). And if that social formation and its ideologies are in the process of modification, a text’s literary and ideological discourses may contradict themselves and each other. Such contradictions may open gaps in the literary text that show ideology to be not “natural” but constructed, not fixed but shifting, not seamless but split.

To illustrate such gaps in Heart of Darkness’s ideology of empire, I turn to the clash of discourses first in a text by Kurtz and then in Marlow’s response to it. Kurtz’s report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs opens with a discourse of empire that mystifies conquest as humanitarianism: “The simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (p. 65). If conquest of the other is thus represented ideologically as “a power for good,” then “the simple exercise of our will” in the suppression of savage customs is legitimated. As I have noted, however, dominant ideologies are not as monolithic or stable as Kurtz’s sentence would like to imply. Under stress, an ideology may be brought out of the realm of the “natural” or unexamined, thus demystified, its contradictions become visible. The “New Imperialism” of the late nineteenth century, what Conrad calls “the new gang — the gang of virtue” (p. 40), was under precisely this kind of stress, a pressure to justify itself as “the transformation of an enlightened despotism into an even more luminous paternalism” (Bongie 275). That pressure splits Kurtz’s text, so that a gap appears between his early advocacy of the “new gang” and the end of his report, “scrawled evidently much later”: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (p. 66). This clash of discourses reveals the contradiction between the brutality of conquest and the mystifying “power for good” of imperialist ideology.

Marlow’s response to Kurtz’s report dramatizes additional contradictions. He admits to “ting[ing] with enthusiasm” for the “unbounded power of eloquence” in Kurtz’s “moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment,” but he vacillates about the report’s conclusion: at one moment it is “terrifying,” at another it is “that valuable postscriptum” (pp. 65–66). The irony of the latter phrase functions here, as irony does throughout his narrative, as “evasion” (Klein 114); it enables him to tell, as if he were detached from its purpose, a story that affirms the ideologies on which his culture operates. Thus Marlow embodies “the uneasy position of the intellectual, unable to support fully, or challenge directly, the interests of the dominant class” (Glenn 253). Specifically, Marlow’s ironic detachment intends to evade what is hinted by the gap between his two responses to the conclusion of Kurtz’s report: his investment in the Company’s imperialist project, his seduction by Kurtz’s eloquence. If we approach such gaps in Marlow’s discourse with feminist
“re-vision” (Rich 35) — the act of “entering an old text from a new critical direction” — we can see the contradictions that his ideological discourses of empire and gender work to mystify. I begin with his representations of the native laundress, the savage woman, and the Company women.

The early episode involving the Company’s chief accountant and his native laundress clarifies both the Company’s imperialist-masculinist brutality and Marlow’s collusion in it. Just prior to meeting the accountant, Marlow encounters a chain gang and its black overseer whose glance of complicity “seemed to take me into partnership” (p. 30) in “the great cause.” This form of the “cause” momentarily undermines Marlow’s masculinity; unlike the “strong, lusty, red-eyed devils” of conquest that “drew men — men, I tell you,” this form is “flabby, pretending, weak-eyed.” The accountant whom Marlow then meets is similarly feminized; sporting an “elegance of get-up” (pp. 31–32) that makes him look like “a hairdresser’s dummy,” he is an effeminate professional rather than a “strong, lusty” conqueror. Yet Marlow respects the “apple-pie order” of the accountant’s books, especially in contrast with the surrounding “muddle” of “dusty niggers” and such. And his reaction to the man’s “get-up” is ironic yet appreciative; the accountant had “verbally accomplished something” by keeping up his appearance, and his clean shirts are “achievements of character” that demonstrate his “backbone.” Irony here enables Marlow to displace an appalling “flabby” imperialism with the accountant’s comic “backbone.”

That irony also mystifies Marlow’s complicity in such “achievements of character” by occluding the laundress who provides the backbone’s starch. The accountant tells Marlow that he has been “teaching one of the native women” to launder his shirts (p. 33); but, he adds, “It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.” This representation of his “teaching” overcoming her “distaste” mystifies the Company man’s oppression of an African woman, and here Marlow shows his collusion in the accountant’s masculinism. Ideologies of empire and gender both operate in his account of this episode, but only the first is mocked; hence a gap opens in the text between the imperial oppression visible to Marlow when it sends native men to the grove of death, and the masculine oppression that remains invisible to him because it seems “natural” that a native woman should do a white man’s laundry. In this gap the laundress becomes vividly present by virtue of her absence; here she, rather than Marlow or the accountant, might speak of her “distaste for the work.”

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That the laundress is silenced indicates Marlow’s power, as the masculine narrator of his story, to conceal not only her story but those of the other silent women in Heart of Darkness. If we turn to his representation of the savage woman, we can see the purposes this silencing serves. Like Kurtz’s eloquence in support of imperialism, Marlow’s narrative is a mystification of power relations that shows that “[men] want to keep woman in the place of mystery, consign her to mystery, as they say ‘keep her in her place, keep her at a distance’” (Cixous 49). As Marlow uses the savage woman to symbolize the enigma of the jungle, his ideological project is to distance and control both mysteries.

The savage woman who appears as Kurtz is being carried onto Marlow’s ship is “the nexus where the discourses of imperialism and patriarchy coincide” (Mongia 146–47). As Marlow constructs her, she is the dark continent of both the African jungle and female sexuality. “A wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (p. 76), she is “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent,” “ominous and stately.” When she appears,

the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fucund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (p. 76)

In this symbology Marlow distances the woman’s body by conflating her with the jungle: as the jungle takes on a body, the woman becomes the “image” of the jungle’s “soul.” By symbolizing the woman and personifying the jungle, Marlow works to contain and control both; thus stylized and immobilized, a complex of potentially dangerous forces becomes “pensive” and nonthreatening.

Once the woman moves toward the ship, however, those forces again become threatening, and Marlow again works to contain them. As she approaches the ship, “looking at us . . . like the wilderness itself” (p. 77) and “brooding over an inscrutable purpose,” she represents for Marlow a menacing jungle sexuality. He has already described the jungle’s absorption of Kurtz as sexual cannibalism: “it had taken him,

2 In criticism as well as literature, such symbolizing is “particularly sinister” for women (Robinson 7); Jungian “pronouncements about The Masculine and The Feminine,” for example, tend to perpetuate “specious generalizations” about both men’s and women’s psyches. Although Sullivan’s reading of the story is Jungian, she points to the ideological uses of such generalizations when she notes that the savage woman, like the Intended, is “recognized, suppressed and rejected” in the service of masculinist and imperialist aims (79).
loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh” (p. 64). As that earlier moment had “feminize[d] the relation between the adventurer and topography” (Monga 139), so too does the savage woman’s “brooding” approach to the ship. She throws up her arms “as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky” (p. 77), and at this moment shadows of the jungle “gather the steamer into a shadowy embrace.” In this gesture of appropriation by the woman/jungle, “the boundaries of masculinity — knowledge, restraint, and order — are under siege” (Monga 141). Even if the content of her gesture is not sexuality but the “wild sorrow” and “dumb pain” Marlow sees in her face, this too threatens the boundaries of masculine restraint, for Marlow has already (over)responded to a similar loss of Kurtz. In his earlier fear that Kurtz was dead, the “startling extravagance” of his sorrow was “even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of these savages” (p. 63). And his backpedaling from grief in that scene indicated his masculine view that “unrestrained grief should be left to the natives and the women” (Staten 723). Faced in the savage woman with not only the threat of sexuality but also the allure of grief, Marlow contains both with his stylized representation of a woman reaching for the sky, the unattainable.

As Marlow turns the savage woman’s body into a symbol of the jungle, this process serves both masculinist and imperialist ends. It is an effort to defuse and control the power and sexuality both of the woman who “tread[s] the earth proudly” (p. 76) and of that “fecdunt” earth itself. As an ideology of gender works to distance and conquer the savage woman’s body, so an ideology of empire works to distance and conquer the mysterious life of the jungle. And Marlow successfully silences the savage woman; like the native laundress, she does not speak in his narrative. Like the laundress’s silence, however, this one creates a gap in the text, a sign of ideological stress that makes visible the fragility of such containment. Such a gap thus reveals “the truth which ideology represses, its own existence as ideology itself” (Belsey 63).

Further instances of ideology as ideology appear when we re-vision Marlow’s representation of the savage woman’s adornments. After detailing the “barbarous ornaments” she wears (p. 76), he concludes that “[s]he must have had the value of several elephant tusks on her.” The woman’s body is here commodified, to become merely the thing on which “value” is displayed. Although Marlow notes that her hair is shaped like a helmet and that she wears leggings and gauntlets, he dismisses these martial signs as “charms” that have meaning only as proto-ivory. And although he relays the Russian’s report that the woman “‘talk[s] like a fury’” (p. 77), he does not record her speech. If we reverse Marlow’s emphasis and concentrate on the woman’s military ornaments and vehement talk, they suggest that she might not be the conventionally feminine (sexually and emotionally dependent on Kurtz) or conventionally native (economically dependent on the ivory trade) figure constructed by Marlow’s ideological narrative. She might be a woman warrior whose gestures and speech, remaining unreadable, give her the power that her “formidable silence” indicates (emphasis added). If such an interpretation demystifies Marlow’s, however, it also runs the risk of forgetting that the savage woman is finally “an inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text” (Spivak 264). In other words, to presume to speak for an Other is to follow Marlow’s strategy, to produce a representation as ideologically grounded as his.

I have already noted the utility of men’s efforts to keep women a mystery, to “‘keep her in her place, keep her at a distance’” (Cixous 49). Marlow’s third such effort to mask his collusion in imperialism appears in his distancing representation of the two women he encounters at the Company’s Brussels office. The mystery of these two women is overdetermined by Marlow’s relentless symbolizing. His insistence on their knitting links them with the three Fates of Greek and Roman mythology, who weave the thread of life and thus control human destiny. Furthermore, when Marlow describes the elder knitter “pilot[ing]” (p. 25) young men into the Company, the verb connects her with Charon, the pilot who ferries the dead across the Styx into Hades. These representations are part of the narrative retrospection intended to protect Marlow from the realization his narrative revives, that in this office he had contracted himself to the Company and to its imperialist “conspiracy.” Hence he displaces the responsibility for his decision onto the younger woman “introducing, introducing continuously [young men] to the unknown,” and onto the elder woman, “uncanny and fateful” in her “unconcerned wisdom.” Marlow crossed the boundary between the self and the other, between individual adventure and Company conspiracy, once he stepped through the office door; hence he attempts to distance the troubling aspects of his decision behind the apparently solid boundary of gender difference.

Yet this maneuver is only momentarily successful, for the elder woman returns into Marlow’s narrative. As he begins his journey into the jungle to retrieve Kurtz, this woman “obtruded herself upon my memory” (p. 80), breached the boundary established by his displacement. Her reappearance serves as a double signal that Marlow’s effort
to distance the Other — the women of the Company and the troubling imperialism he transferred to them — was bound to fail. When the elder Company woman intrudes in the shape of “the knitting old woman with the cat,” the uneasiness Marlow displaced now returns with greater strength for its repression. This silent figure of civilized domesticity only seems incongruous in the jungle; her reappearance dramatizes the futility of Marlow’s attempt to separate the realm of domesticity from that of colonial adventure, the feminine sphere from the masculine.

Like the ideology of imperialism, the ideology of separate, gendered spheres was under pressure in the late nineteenth century. Single and financially independent, the New Woman was becoming visible in the stores, offices, and streets of Europe and even in the dark continent; Mary Kingsley was one of several women travelers in Africa. Yet Heart of Darkness clings to the older ideology of separate spheres, in an effort to resolve the contradictions of Marlow’s position vis-à-vis Kurtz. Marlow’s experience of Kurtz places him in a “feminine predicament,” a situation of perceived physical and/or social powerlessness (Klein 102–06). On the one hand, Marlow is seduced by the “unbounded power of eloquence” in Kurtz’s imperialist ideology; on the other hand, he is also drawn to Kurtz’s final summation, “The horror! The horror!” (p. 85), because it too is “the expression of some sort of belief” (p. 86). Marlow attempts to escape this feminine predicament by his representations of his aunt and the Intended. Through them he constructs a feminine world of “idea”-belief to stand alongside the masculine world of Kurtz’s “horror”-belief; located in separate spheres, these contradictory ideologies can coexist. And so that Marlow can stabilize his masculinity by confronting feminine ideologies of empire, the two European women are not silenced. By mocking the lack of imperial experience that their words convey, he can represent his own experience as a manly encounter with truth; through their echoes of the case Kurtz made for imperialism, he can reverse the powerlessness evinced in his response to Kurtz’s eloquence. Marlow’s construction of these women dramatizes the point of his story, its manful effort to shore up an ideology of imperialism with an ideology of separate spheres.

The belief that will later be grounded in the aunt and the Intended first emerges in Marlow’s preface to his narrative.

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only . . . not a sentimental pretence but an idea, and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . . (p. 21)

Although this credo precedes the story Marlow tells his hearers, it is important to remember that he has already “looked into” such a “conquest of the earth.” Recuperating that experience requires an ideology whereby an ugly exercise of power (“Exterminate all the brutes!”) is redeemed by an idea. Like his irony, Marlow’s belief in the “idea” behind imperialism is a retrospective attempt to mask his complicity in the Company’s imperialism. But Marlow’s statement displays all the contradictions he intends to suppress: between the reality and the idea of conquest, between an idea and a “sentimental pretence” (how would one tell the difference?), between an “unselfish belief” and a self-serving hypocrisy. After these framing sentences, Marlow “broke off” before beginning his tale; this gap reveals the contradiction between his need for an imperialist “idea” and his experience of the horror, a contradiction he attempts to resolve by constructing the feminine sphere of his aunt and the Intended.

Marlow’s representations of his aunt perform several functions in his narrative. He first mentions her in connection with his difficulties in getting hired by the Company. After his own efforts and those of his male relatives fail, his aunt, who believes in “the glorious idea” behind the Company (p. 23), successfully intercedes for him. His condescending construction of her, as “a dear enthusiastic soul” who was “determined to make no end of fuss,” intends to disguise the failure of his own “fuss.” Marlow’s next comment on this transaction displays a “class-based ambivalence” (Glenn 248) toward “bourgeois women collaborating in and acting as apologists for” ventures like the Company. When he admits that “would you believe it? — I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work — to get a job. Heavens!” (p. 23), his jocularity implies that no woman could have influence in such masculine matters, and thus that the world of experience is and should be a man’s world.

During Marlow’s farewell visit to his aunt, he uses her feminine lack of experience and debased imperialist rhetoric to construct the “sentimental pretence” that can be distinguished from “an idea” and then rejected. Like her room, which “most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady’s drawing-room to look” (p. 26), her “emissary of light” school of imperialism is represented as bourgeois and feminine.
She quotes Scripture “brightly” (in other words, she is uncritically devout); she is “carried off her feet” by “rot” and “humbug” (unlike Marlow, who knows a sentimental pretence when he sees one). And her “glorious idea” of his work — “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” — is womanly idealism, whereas his response — “the Company was run for profit” — is manly realism.

But his aunt’s belief in “weaning those ignorant millions” is not unambiguously feminine: it is a variant of the masculine imperialism in Kurtz’s “exert[ing] a power for good practically unbounded.” Why, then, do these words from Kurtz have “the unbounded power of eloquence” for Marlow, at least initially, whereas he dismisses his aunt’s similar vision out of hand? To answer this question, we must examine a central passage in which Marlow equates truth with the masculine recognition of “fact.” Commenting on one of his aunt’s “bright” remarks, Marlow says:

It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over. (p. 27)

Here it is assumed (“It’s queer” — that is, strange but true) that all women (extrapolating from one woman) are out of touch with “truth,” which is identified with masculine “fact.” It follows that the nonfactual “world of their own” that women inhabit is “too beautiful” to exist; in the man’s world “there had never been anything like it, and never can be.” It also follows that “truth” can be experienced only in the masculine sphere. This is the burden of Marlow’s description of native rites and his response to them. These rites display “truth stripped of its cloak” (p. 51); if they “were man enough,” Marlow tells his male hearers, they would admit their response to such truth, as he did; in fact, to “meet that truth with his own true stuff” one must be “as much of a man” as the natives.

To this exclusively masculine sphere of experience and truth, Marlow then adds the capacity for belief. He first defines a man’s “true stuff” as “inborn strength” (p. 51); he then distinguishes this inborn strength from “principles,” which are mere “acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags”; and he concludes that true manly stuff is finally “a deliberate belief.” By equating “a man’s true stuff” with both his “inborn strength” and his “deliberate belief,” Marlow constructs stuff/strength/belief as “inborn” in men, natural to them. Even though a man’s belief is acquired (“deliberate”), it is made to seem different in kind from principles, that “acquisition” with a whiff of the feminine (“pretty rags”). Belief, then, becomes a fully masculine activity: it inheres naturally in men and surfaces through manly experience. While his aunt is not “man enough” to experience savagery so as to come to “truth” and “deliberate belief,” both Kurtz and Marlow are. The aunt’s feminine version of imperialism is thus a “sentimental pretence” because, unlike Kurtz’s “idea,” it is not — and by definition cannot be — validated by experience. Through this process of mystification, Marlow has produced an ideological defense of masculine belief. Filtered through his manly experience of truth, belief in the imperialist “idea” can now be used to redeem a reality that is “not pretty.”

To fully recuperate Kurtzian imperialism from the taint of a “too beautiful” feminine ideology, however, Marlow must cope with a “confounded fact”: that Kurtz’s own final recognition of “the horror” belies the “idea” that redeems conquest. As Marlow puts this difficulty, “No eloquence could have been so withering to one’s belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity” (p. 82). Here the contradiction between the eloquence of imperialism and the brutality of its exercise, which Marlow had earlier read in Kurtz’s report, directly enters his experience. Kurtz’s initial “eloquence” now stands in stark contrast to his final “sincerity,” and this sincerity threatens to wither the “belief in mankind” that legitimizes imperialism for Marlow. If this new voice were to drown out Kurtz’s earlier eloquence, then belief in the “idea” would become impossible and Marlow’s experience would become what he fears it to be: “one immense jabber . . . without any kind of sense.” And even as Marlow attempts to belittle Kurtz as “very little more than a voice,” he remains troubled by “voices, voices — even the girl herself — now —” (p. 63).

The placing of this first mention of Kurtz’s Intended indicates the uses Marlow will make of her. The reference marks a “long” silence in Marlow’s narrative, a gap after he reveals his fear of “jabber” and before he states the “deliberate belief” he has now invested in the Intended.

Oh, she is out of it — completely. They — the women I mean — are out of it — should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it. (p. 63)
That an ideology of separate spheres enables masculine imperialism could hardly be more clearly stated. Where Marlow had earlier dismissed this woman’s world as “too beautiful altogether,” its ideality is now essential: carefully kept “out of it,” separated from “our” world of experience, the feminine sphere of “idea” will prevent the masculine sphere of “fact” from deteriorating. Marlow’s speech thus suggests how the masculine production of feminine identity works in the interests of the dominant ideology (London 238). Specifically, it suggests his need to construct a “beautiful world” around the Intended. There he can order the cacophony of “voices, voices” — Kurtz’s “eloquence,” his “sincerity,” and the Intended’s “echo of his magnificent eloquence” (p. 87) — by setting her speech off against the others. And there he can contain Kurtzian imperialism, by embodying in the Intended an “unselfish belief” in the now purified “idea.”

Like all the women in this story, then, the Intended is Marlow’s construct. As he had earlier commodified the savage woman’s body, he now reduces the Intended to a “pure brow” (p. 90) “illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” (p. 91). He locates in her a “beautiful generosity” (p. 92) and “a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (p. 90) — in short, the “unselfish belief” he requires. Most important, her faith in the power of Kurtzian eloquence enables Marlow to contain and transform that eloquence. “Bowing [his] head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion” (p. 92), Marlow removes the threat of eloquence from the sphere of his own experience and translates it into her “out of it” world. A faith in Kurtz’s eloquence would have been a delusion in the man’s sphere where it was contradicted by Kurtz’s belief in the horror. In the Intended’s feminine sphere, however, it becomes the “great and saving illusion” with which Marlow orders the “jabber” that would otherwise destroy his belief in the “idea.” As Marlow bows before her faith, then, he fulfills his ideological project of creating the redeeming idea — “something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (p. 21). While he appears to be bowing to her, he is in fact idolizing his own “idea” — the “something” he has “set up” in her.

To complete his posture of belief, however, Marlow must “offer a sacrifice,” and who better than the Intended with her “capacity for suffering”? Hence his lie, telling her that Kurtz’s last words were her name. It is true that Marlow feels he has sacrificed himself: even though he “hate[s], detest[s], and can’t bear a lie” (p. 42), he tells this one out of his “infinite pity” for her suffering (p. 93). But if Marlow conceives himself as a “heroic deliverer” (Straus 129) rescuing the Intended from grief, with his “chivalric” lie he is in fact “underscoring an ideology that defines a protective lie as a moral act” when performed by a man. And surely the particular lie Marlow chooses is meant to satisfy his “dull anger” (p. 93) with the Intended’s naïveté and her insistence that he give her something “to live with.” He and his audience — and the reader — know that by substituting the Intended’s name for “the horror” he equates the two; her ignorance of this equation becomes a punishing humiliation. Further intimations of assault are the setting — a “place of cruel and absurd mysteries” (p. 91) — and her responding to the lie with “an exulting and terrible cry” (p. 93) of “unspeakable pain” and “inconceivable triumph.” With these four obfuscatory adjectives, Marlow suggests that he has sacrificed the Intended to her own “saving illusion,” a suggestion that justifies his act: the pain he intended to inflict is validated (like the rape victim, she asked for it) by the accompanying triumph (and she liked it).³

Marlow’s lie also functions to stabilize both the feminine sphere of “saving illusion” and the masculine sphere of “confounded fact.” The lie protects the “beautiful world” of women that now enshrines his “deliberate belief,” because Marlow knows it is a lie, however, the world in which men experience the truth of horror continues to stand. Thus Marlow brings truth to men by . . . bringing falsehood to women (Straus 130). When he states that telling the Intended the truth would have been “too dark altogether” (p. 93), the echo of “too beautiful altogether” reverberates with this defensive rationale for condoning off the woman’s world. By creating an alternative women’s sphere “lest ours gets worse,” men can continue to confront their “own true stuff” in their world. And the violence with which Marlow’s lie sacrifices the Intended to this masculine world indicates the strength of its homosocial bonds. As he successfully competes with the Intended for “the status of Kurtz’s most enduring conquest” (London 245), the pain he inflicts on her dramatizes how women are used “to deny, distort, and censor men’s passionate love for one another” (Straus 134). And not only women: Marlow’s description of his helmsman’s death becomes “a

³Staten (736–39) argues that Marlow functions as Kurtz’s emissary, thereby fulfilling the latter’s sadistic project of forcing the Intended into the total mourning that will confirm his existence. While Staten gives full value to the Intended’s cry, his reading nonetheless shares in Marlow’s commodification of her. Staten’s tendency to reduce her to a cry is not unlike Marlow’s tendency to reduce her to a function of himself.
The supreme moment of male bonding” with his hearers (London 248), and his similar reductions of native men to conduits of narrative “delineate the common ground Marlow and his audience occupy” as white men (London 249). Thus, although Marlow consistently browbeats and insults his audience — and, by extension, Conrad’s — finally the white bourgeois male reader is included in Marlow’s “voice of cultural authority.” With all these techniques of “artistic force” (Fogel 20) — the lie to the Intended, Marlow’s offhand uses of the word “nigger,” Conrad’s “insistent, domining” style (Fogel 21) — Heart of Darkness demonstrates the brutality in discourses of empire and gender.

I conclude with the issues raised by Conrad’s style, for they are useful entries into recent critical re-visions of Heart of Darkness’s ideological discourses. In 1978, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe termed Conrad “a bloody racist” (9), in part because of the stylistic “trickery” (4) with which he purported to describe Africa and Africans but in fact dehumanized them. Like Patrick Brantlinger’s essay in this volume, essays by Benita Parry, Sandya Shetty, and Reynold Humphries analyze the extent to which Conrad’s imperialist discourse “functions to hide the expansionism” of the Western bourgeoisie (Humphries 114) and to “naturalize its presence in the Third World.” For André Brink, Conrad’s stylistic obfuscations suggest that a “ready-made, conventional, eurocentric, male language” (4) is inadequate to “give literary substance to Africa”, as this language breaks down into jabber, “Woman” (5) becomes “the ground of meaning” in Heart of Darkness. Brink here replicates Conrad’s gender ideology; in contrast, one feminist reading attributes the novel’s “density and inaccessibility” not to the breakdown of its masculine language but to its “extremely masculine historical referentiality” (Straus 124), and another analyzes how the text enacts “the construction of the white male speaking subject as narrative authority” (London 239). Where John McClure and Patrick Parrinder analyze Conrad’s dependence on conventions of the popular fiction that glorified imperial adventure, Padmini Mongia focuses on how such conventions construct African and European women as sites where anxieties of gender as well as empire are played out. In my feminist reading of Heart of Darkness, I too have tried to show the utility for imperialist ideology of a gender ideology that constructs a feminine sphere as “too beautiful altogether.”

WORKS CITED