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Kipling's Famine-Romance: Masculinity, Gender and Colonial Biopolitics in 'William the Conqueror'

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Abstract:

Our present understanding of colonial masculinity is strongly mediated by Kipling's fictional representation of late nineteenth-century India as a space of male self-determination and imperial service. This essay concentrates on one of Kipling's short-stories, 'William the Conqueror', first published in an American women's magazine, and speculates on how a female audience might have caused Kipling to modify his (conventional) depiction of Anglo-Indian gender-relations. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's work and reviewing the history of colonial famine-relief, I suggest that the formal conjunction of the romance genre with the unusual setting of a famine-relief camp is the key to Kipling's 'gender-transactions' in this story, and can be read as an indicator of the 'biopolitical' logic of the camp as a space of sovereign exception.

Scott sat bolt upright under the oil lamp as the train jolted past Tarn-Taran station [...] "All the [women ...] I've ever heard of would have stayed where they were well off" [he said ...] "a famine's no place for a woman".

Rudyard Kipling, "William the Conqueror" in *Selected Stories*, pp. 326--7

Kipling's current reputation as the literary prophet of high imperialism is founded on a long-established assumption that his ideal reader was invariably male, and that his object was always, in the admiring words of the pro-empire poet W. E. Henley, the crafting of narratives of a "man's work done for men" (Henley [1890] in Arondekar 68). Echoing this contemporary review, many critics now argue, with some justification, that the depth and detail of Kipling's imperial-masculine world is purchased at the expense of his female characters, especially Indian women, who are marginalized or appear in it as flattened, stock figures. In works such as *Kim*, argues Patrick Williams, the absence of Anglo-Indian¹ women functions to displace a general condemnation of women onto Indian women, and sets up a binary thematic in which the latter are presented as a distraction and a potential threat (Williams 489). Anjali Arondekar goes further, stating that Kipling's female characters are "produced and

¹ Throughout his paper the term 'Anglo-Indian' refers to British nationals living in colonial India.

needed as subjects who must enable and/or invite their own erasure and/or rescue at the hands of their English male counterparts” (Arondekar 79). In turn, the “narrative desire” that characterizes Kipling’s work expresses itself in a creative over-investment in masculinity, so that his male characters exist “on a continuum between homosociality and homoeroticism”, arrogating to themselves repressed “feminine” roles and becoming surrogate mothers, wives and besotted admirers to their male companions (Ibid. 77).

In the following pages I will not fundamentally challenge these established readings of the gender-biases in Kipling’s fiction or question his role in re-imagining an imperial masculinity. Rather, I want to concentrate on one particular short story, “William the Conqueror”, in order to assess Kipling’s approach to gender in instances where he anticipated a *female* rather than a male readership. A female audience is, clearly, no guarantee of any reassessment of gender-norms by a male author, but in its unconventional setting and its presentation of Anglo-Indian courtship, this unusual story does suggest that the “transaction” of gender in Kipling’s work might be more extensive, and more closely implicated in the scripting of colonial governance, than has hitherto been suggested.

Kipling published in a wide variety of newspapers and journals, and in December 1895 and January 1896 his short story “William the Conqueror” appeared in two women’s magazines: the (British) *Gentlewoman* and (American) *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Written in the year he returned to Britain from America, “William the Conqueror” may have reflected Kipling’s nostalgia for what he saw as the simpler frontier-ethos of American life, and his anticipated American readership certainly complicates the lines of production and reception of his narrative; not only does Kipling negotiate differences of gender between colony and metropole in “William

the Conqueror”, he also, crucially, writes around the centre -- reflecting colonial Anglo-India back to the ex-settler colony of the United States in the text.²

Set in an Indian famine-relief camp, “William the Conqueror” is intriguing because it revisits the masculine “frontier” location of many of Kipling’s stories, but uses it as the unlikely stage for an Anglo-Indian romance (echoing, in the process, the frontier settings of contemporary American popular romances). Instead of seeming to reinforce the “cruel conventional division of the sexes” of Kipling’s India (Wilson 88), “William the Conqueror” blurs or transacts gender roles: presenting us with a heroine -- “answer[ing] indifferently to the name of William or Bill” -- who is noticeably boyish and masculine, and male characters who, in turn, adopt quasi-maternal roles. (The story’s famine camp setting conceals an irony here, since its trans-gendering emphasis is also camp in the colloquial sense of a trans-sexual performance of gender -- by *both* manly women and womanly men). A further question Kipling’s famine-romance poses is whether the conjunction of “camp” setting and gender-alignment goes beyond coincidental irony, indicating -- as I believe it does -- a more profound inter-relationship between gender, the ambiguous performance of Anglo-Indian masculinity, and the sovereign logic of colonial government.

In linking gender-‘transaction’ with concepts of sovereignty in “William the Conqueror”, I will draw on the work of contemporary theorists of gender as well as political-philosophical analyses of government as “biopolitics”. The latter concept, and its variant, “biopower”, has featured increasingly in recent analyses of global

² The fact that Kipling was married to Carrie Balestier, an American from Vermont, may have influenced his decision to publish in women’s magazines there, rather than in Britain. Interestingly, one of his closest friends in Allahabad was another American woman, Mrs Edmonia Hill, who was a possible model for the heroine of “William the Conqueror”. Edmonia Hill (known as “Ted”) was the lively unconventional wife of a professor at Muir college; Kipling lodged at their home, Belvedere House, during his time a reporter on the Allahabad *Pioneer* (see Wilson 117--9).

counter-terrorism and the politics of “partial” citizenship -- in which the camp represents an exceptional, extra-legal site designed and maintained in the interests of western “security”. Kipling’s romance, in grimly evoking the earlier colonial-governmental regime of the famine-relief camp, invites a reading that retroactively applies these ideas. As I will argue, the camp (as a governmental responses to mass-starvation) was always, paradoxically, a symptom of the systemic violence and selective legal “abandonments” at the very heart of colonial rule.

*

The plot-structure of “William the Conqueror” involves the relatively simple premise of a situational switch: Kipling’s youthful heroine “William” exchanges colonial Lahore for the barren world of the famine-relief camp, and thus finds love in what seems, initially, the most unromantic of settings. The “romance” that blossoms unexpectedly in the camp is further undercut by William’s boyish practicality, and her obliviousness to any of the poetic/aesthetic assumptions that conventionally shape popular forms of the genre. William thus becomes Kipling’s foil to any readerly expectations that fragile or fastidious forms of Victorian femininity can be transplanted, unchanged, to the colony, and exemplifies the possibility of “conquering” the unrelenting difference of colonial life through a willingness to adapt.

William’s background is sketched out by Kipling in a characteristically bold outline early in the narrative. Having gone out to India four years previously to housekeep for her brother, she has stubbornly refused to marry any of her numerous suitors, and has “fallen out of the habit of writing to her aunts in England, or cutting

the pages of the English magazines” (Kipling 1987: 323). Instead she has “enjoyed herself hugely” in the kinds of escapades that are the stuff of imperial adventure:

Twice she had been nearly drowned while fording a river on horseback; once she had been run away with on a camel; had witnessed a midnight attack of thieves on her brother’s camp; had seen justice administered, with long sticks, in the open under trees; could speak Urdu and even rough Punjabi with a fluency that was envied by her seniors; [...] had been through a very bad cholera year [and] seen sights unfit to be told. (Kipling 1987: 323)

William’s transgression of conventional metropolitan gender roles is exacerbated by her (sub-continental) location, since her brother Martyn, an impoverished acting police superintendent, cannot afford to send her to Simla during the hot season. Thus William is effectively *misplaced* in the cultural topography of Kipling’s India, in which hill stations are almost exclusively associated with assignation and courtship, and the plains with the chaste masculine work of colonial service. We are led to believe that this is William’s preferred arrangement, and her response to an admirer from the Educational Department who is snubbed because of his “poetical” tendencies (“I like men who do things”; Kipling 1987: 323) indicates her affinities with Kipling’s masculine-public world of “none except picked men at their definite work” (Kipling 1937: 43).

Although William’s behaviour is viewed as mildly eccentric by her male Anglo-Indian compatriots who have remained in Lahore during the hot weather, she trespasses more seriously in the realm of colonial masculinity when she insists on accompanying her brother and their friend Scott (an Irrigation Engineer) after they are called up suddenly to work on famine-relief operations hundreds of miles to the south.

Discovering what has happened, Scott protests³ and is told that Martyn has been helpless against William's stubborn determination: "she wouldn't hear of any compromise [...] she's as clever as a man, confound her [...] she broke up the bungalow over my head while I talked to her. Settled the whole *subchiz* [outfit] in three hours -- servants, horses and all" (Kipling 1987: 327). (Both men are subsequently mollified when William makes them all tea in the sweltering train compartment *en route* to the famine.)

The rest of Kipling's narrative deals with William and Scott's largely unselfconscious love affair, a romance that has to grow in the few intervals between Scott's lengthy treks to distant famine centres and William's work nursing children at the famine-relief camp. In perhaps the most striking scene in the story, Scott returns to the camp with a herd of goats and a group of Indian children he has collected, appearing (to the reader and the enchanted William) as the beneficent image of colonial guardianship: "He had no desire to make a dramatic entry, but an accident of the sunset ordered that, [...] one waiting at the tent door beheld, with new eyes, a young man, beautiful as Paris, a god in a halo of golden dust, walking slowly at the head of his flocks". (Kipling 1987: 334) Such a complex tableau, evoking imperial work as epic and presenting Scott in the image of Christ, alerts us to the previously mentioned counter-movement in Kipling's depiction of gender, in which Scott, forced to feed his "flock" of abandoned children by milking the goats he has requisitioned, exchanges masculinity for maternity, just as William has earlier "borrowed" masculinity in her desire to be included in "men's work". Kipling's famine-romance culminates in the couple's engagement, presented as an awkward recognition of mutual care, and their triumphant return "home" to Lahore for Christmas, where they

³ See epigraph quotation.

listen to “hidden voices” singing the traditional St Stephen’s day⁴ carol “Good King Wenceslas” in the club.

Considering our preliminary summary of imperial masculinity in Kipling’s writing, it is tempting to read “William the Conqueror” in terms of the homoeroticism that his writing allegedly disavows (Arondekar 68). Indeed, William’s “masculinity” readily becomes a cipher for homosexuality: she first appears sitting on a leather camp sofa “like a boy” beguilingly tossing cigarettes to her brother “with a gesture true as a school-boy’s” (Kipling 1987: 324). The description of Scott as a potential “beautiful” lover, and a Greek “god” is equally suggestive of a queering of imperial manliness. As we saw earlier, however, the close semantic and conceptual connection of gender and setting in the text alerts us to the allegorization of exceptional or emergency modes of colonial governance in “William Conqueror”, alongside its more subjective gender-politics. In fact, what we have termed the story’s “camp” setting reflects British colonialism’s ongoing need to maintain a semblance of constitutional-legal rights and safeguards for its Indian subjects, whilst simultaneously protecting its own powers to suspend these rights in emergencies. As a temporary internal-colonial space with its own law, the famine camp situates this loss of rights very clearly, suggesting, in Kipling’s text, all kinds of interrupted/suspended order, including, it seems, the orders of late nineteenth-century gender-relations. To understand exactly how this occurs we must review the conventional spatial “mapping” of masculinity and femininity in metropolitan Victorian society (across domestic and public space) asking, in the process, how Anglo-Indian society “re-located” gender, as it met the peculiar demands of colonial administration.

⁴ Boxing Day – a day therefore associated with generosity and charitable donation. Kipling’s conclusion gestures towards the story’s December publication.

Gender, Domesticity and Colonial Fiction

The spatial location of middle-class gender (especially masculinity) in relation to domesticity has an interestingly changeable history throughout the nineteenth century. By the 1830s and 40s, argues the cultural historian John Tosh, middle-class masculinity in Britain had largely exchanged a public associational ideal for a more “companionate” form, in which manliness was increasingly defined in terms of domestic/familial roles such as those of fathers and husbands. Entirely congruent with “separate-sphere” models of gender-difference, and evangelical celebrations of the home, companionate masculinity staged domestic married life as the morally sustaining counterpart to the harsher realities of the Victorian public world. In the domestic sphere, the middle-class woman’s roles remained limited to those of wife and mother, but these were refashioned in the guise of spiritual guide and helpmeet for her spouse.

However, by the 1870s and 80s the ideal of companionate masculinity had gradually given way to new expressions of manliness that emphasized independence, militaristic discipline and heroic self-fashioning beyond the home. For cultural historians such as Tosh and Dawson, the *locus classicus* of “muscular masculinity” was the colony and the colonial frontier -- the global space in which the “flight from domesticity” is literally played out at the end of the nineteenth century. Tosh’s model can be criticized for its assumption of a monolithic paradigm-shift in what were inherently variable middle-class attitudes to manliness. However, even allowing for these reservations, his claim that popular imperialism valorized a new kind of homosocial masculinity is convincing, and matches the growing institutional

separation of middle-class men from family life in public schools, army messes and clubs.

Changing literary representations of masculinity in the popular romance in the late 1800s point, equally, towards the propagation of new “imperial” ideals of manliness. Alongside love stories or “art romances” (involving intrigue and courtship and featuring a female protagonist), new masculine adventure-romances such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) appeared which anticipated a male readership, featured few female characters, and involved exploration and colonial adventure (Paxton 138). Although Kipling’s work is too eclectic to be pigeonholed thus, he is often retrospectively associated with this genre. We must remember, however, that Kipling was also part of a colonial literary tradition that included significant numbers of women writers, producing *both* kinds of romance, and sometimes grafting love stories onto the archetypal settings of the frontier and the colonial “small war”. In evaluating “William the Conqueror”, these authors provide important clues about the hegemonic potential of gender, and its relation to domesticity and empire.

Supplementing Tosh’s symbolic “global” mapping of gender, the major women-“romancers” of Anglo-India, such as Flora Annie Steel, Maud Diver, Alice Perrin, and F.E. Penny (see Parry), provide us with important evidence for how gender and domesticity were translated to, and refigured in, the colony. Reading their work we realize that, far from being irrelevant or somehow inapplicable to a colonial setting, images of (companionate) “home-life” still had considerable symbolic weight in the Anglo-Indian imagination, even as their relocation to the colony modified their conventional form. Exploring the “politics of home” in Anglo-Indian women’s fiction and housekeeping guides, Rosemary George argues that images of English women

ideologically reinforced empire on two levels: “the first [...] was that of managers of ‘base camp’, helpmeets and partners in the imperial enterprise. The second level is the more covertly articulated use of the white woman’s presence in the colonies as a [crisis-led] rationalization for the necessity of the violent repression of colonised peoples” (George 44).

These two modalities need to be unpacked a little, if we are to understand their full relevance here. The initial “managerial” role available to Anglo-Indian women reflects the variation that “domesticity” could take in the colony. The predominantly male service- or military emphasis of Anglo-Indian life meant that both the arrangement of domestic space and its permanence were different in India. In contemporary accounts, we find that Anglo-Indian domestic space is much less rigidly (internally) demarcated (especially in relation to servants and young children) than the space of the Victorian metropolitan home (Collingham 103). In India homes might also be abandoned at short notice (as in Kipling’s story), and recreated -- under canvas, in *dak* bungalows or in railway-carriages during inspection tours and new postings. Consequently Anglo-Indian women, as home-makers, were expected to show a quasi-military genius for improvisation, hardiness and ingenuity -- crucially *repeating* the managerial and juridical imperatives of the imperial government.⁵

The managerial expression of Anglo-Indian gender-roles has a further effect: namely, the development of wider “social sphere” in the colony beyond what might strictly be called the domestic. The term “social sphere” refers here to a feminized area of operation incorporating public space but oppositional to the “political” masculine sphere - in India, it encompasses both the household (and the associated

⁵ Sublimating any maternal feelings in the management of servants (children were routinely sent home at an early age) the skills expected of Anglo Indian women were language acquisition, diplomacy, disciplinary regulation -- the skills of imperial administration writ small.

management of Indian servants), and the wider social remit of missionary work and public health initiatives. In this expanded colonial social field, the reform of Indian women thus became the reciprocal means by which Anglo-Indian women achieved a limited subjecthood (George 39).

The second hegemonic mode that mediates gender and Anglo-Indian women's identity -- that of the "crisis" in which the presence of women justifies violence against the colonized -- is less coherently elaborated by George. However, considering Kipling's literary inheritance, the genre that we must look to for this "crisis"-dramatization of women's roles is the Mutiny novel, which comprehensively re-imagined the rebellion of 1857 in the years after the conflict. It is partly the demands for an enabling historical identity articulated as epic sacrifice that explains the impressive popularity and longevity of the "Mutiny-novel", which emerged, as a form of (recent-) historical novel, in the late 1860s and peaked in the 1890s. For Kipling, the memory of 1857 was a complex creative problem -- contemporary critics assumed he would eventually write *the* historical novel of the "Mutiny" (Gregg 231), but he resisted these expectations. In *Kim* he treats the rebellion as a distant memory, and in a letter to a friend he had already admitted that "'57 is the year we don't talk about and I know I can't [...] I'd try in a minute if I felt I had a call that way but I'm rather convinced I have not" (Pinney 219-20; Nagai 2005: 93).

The highly-charged presentation of gender in the fictional and documentary accounts of the 1857 rebellion has been extensively analysed by feminist literary and cultural critics (Sharpe; Paxton; Procida). Noting the discursive importance of (largely erroneous) narratives of rape and mutilation of Anglo-Indian women by Indian rebels that circulated throughout India during the "crisis months" of the conflict (July to November 1857), these critics have shown how subsequent Mutiny-novels preserved

the lurid, formulaic trope of the atrocity-narrative as an allegory of moral transgression and betrayal, and an attack on the most cherished values of mid-nineteenth century family life and colonial authority. Transcribed in fiction (even after they had been discredited), atrocity rumours and “rape-scripts” (Paxton 5--6) preserved the memory of insurgency as a sexual crime, thereby reinforcing the moral sovereignty of colonial men. The Mutiny-novel genre thus heralds a wholesale reinvestment in the “chivalric/romantic” capacities of colonial counter-insurgency, and Anglo-Indian sacrifice.

We must also note that many retrospective colonial treatments of the 1857 rebellion, including histories, present the “crisis” as productive of an intriguing confusion or transaction of gender roles. Contemporary reports of colonial soldiers’ reactions to the horrifying scenes in the notorious *bibighar* at Cawnpore (*Kanpur*), where the rebel leader Nana Sahib had ordered the execution of Anglo-Indian women and children, repeatedly emphasize the “emasculating” effect of the sight of the room in which the victims were killed: “Accustomed as those stern men had been to scenes of blood and the devastating ravages of war, the sack of towns and the carnage of the battlefield, the spectacle that now met their gaze *unmanned* the strongest of their ranks” (Ball 377). This “unmanning” had a discursive counterpart, in many colonial accounts of sieges and conflicts with Indian forces, of a transformative “masculinizing” of Anglo-Indian women, who loaded guns, repaired defences and generally engaged more actively in colonial conflict than Victorian gender stereotypes allowed ⁶.

Sovereignty, Exception and Colonial Biopower

⁶ See for instance Edward Money’s *Mutiny Romance The Wife and the Ward* (1858), which celebrates the courage of Anglo-Indian women at the siege of Wheeler’s entrenchment at Cawnpore.

Read against the dominant modes through which Anglo-Indian women's gender roles were mediated, Kipling's boyish heroine seems rather less transgressive than she first appears. William conforms (albeit in an exaggerated way) to the ideal of capable Anglo-Indian womanhood delineated in romances and colonial household management guides, and her "masculinity" is regulated by her deferring identification with Kipling's masculine imperial work ethic: "Life with men who had a great deal of work to do", we are told, "had taught her the wisdom of effacing" (Kipling 1987: 327). Moreover, when Martyn, Scott and William arrive at the famine camp, the latter is allowed little real responsibility, and is given 'domestic' work nursing abandoned famine orphans. We realize here that Kipling has not, in fact, tried to envisage "femininity" differently, or even imagine a more complex female character like Mrs Hauksbee from *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888). Instead, he has simply transposed the aspects of colonial masculinity he valued onto a female character.⁷ William, in embodying the "managerial" and "crisis" ideals of colonial womanhood, complements Scott, even as she becomes his *Doppelgänger* or gender-double.

There is, moreover, another, more symbolic effect of William's presence in the famine camp: that of a living emblem of national-colonial identity and duty. In an aside to his wife, the head of the famine relief programme, Jimmy Hawkins, suggests that William's presence has inspired Scott's efforts. In his comments we encounter another gendering mechanism of colonialism -- that of the "chivalric" symbolic identification of womanhood with national-imperial ideals, an association encouraged by the spatial contiguities between domestic/public and

⁷ William can be read, in some ways, as an "auto-erotic" surrogate of the younger Kipling -- removed professionally from the soldiers, engineers and administrators s/he idealizes, but identifying intimately with them.

national/international spaces already discussed, but also implicit in Queen Victoria's double significance as queen and wife/matriarch⁸. In the idealized association of womanhood/motherhood as a metaphorical register for national identity, William becomes the expression of Britannia as empress, a figure that also evokes earlier elaborations of sword-bearing angelic "justice" in the iconography of 'Mutiny' counter-insurgency.

Far from being incidental to the depiction of gender in "William the Conqueror", this last symbolic reference to nationhood and justice is, in fact, the key to the text's unusual "camp" correlation of the romance and famine. Indeed, even a cursory reading of the text reveals a dense metaphorical economy organized around the figure of the monarch. In the title, William, an "honorary" colonial man but *also* an Anglo-Indian woman, is associated with monarchy-as-conquest; and in the conclusion, with its references to the carol "Good King Wenceslas", she symbolizes monarchy-as-charity. Bookended between these two singular evocations of royalty, the thematic burden of this story becomes very clearly that of colonial *sovereignty*. The fact that William is named after a king who invaded Britain, usurping sovereignty by force, adds a note of anxiety to the narrative, encoding a worrying instability in the trope of (female) sovereignty. The variability of sovereign power 'in crisis' also informs the unusual trajectory of the narrative, in its slow oscillation from the "normal" sovereign regime of *mofussil* life to the exceptional "emergency" administration of the famine-zone and then "home" again.

Kipling's emphasis on threatened "exceptional" sovereignty in "William the Conqueror" recalls the work of the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who has,

⁸ The idea of a sustaining 'domestic sovereignty' was thus built into Victorian public culture: as the contemporary constitutional historian Walter Bagehot stated approvingly, 'a family on the throne is an interesting idea [...] it brings down the pride of sovereignty to the level of petty life'. Bagehot, Walter. *The English Constitution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [first published 1867]. p. 41) .

in recent years, made a provocative case for seeing sovereignty as ontologically defined by its own “decisionist” power. Drawing on the writings of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, Agamben’s theorizing of sovereignty circles around an aporia in which sovereign power expresses itself as a suspension of or exception to the law. As Schmitt states: “Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” (Schmitt). Agamben’s concentration on sovereignty as a special decision-making status in and above the law, detailed in *State of Exception* (2005), represents a continuation of the concerns of his earlier work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) in which he notes an asymmetrical correspondence between sovereign power and the “sacred man”. “The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life - that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed - is the life that has been captured in this sphere” [italics in original] (Agamben 1998: 83). For Agamben the exemplary modern expression of the logic of *homo sacer* is the Nazi concentration camp: a metonymic space for the wider normalized exceptionalism of the Third Reich.

In envisaging the camp as the *nomos* of the modern, the “very paradigm of political space” (Agamben 1998: 171), Agamben subtly revises Foucault’s earlier concept of *biopower*. In Foucault’s writing, the terms *biopower* and *biopolitics* describe governmental technologies developed in eighteenth-century Europe that succeeded but did not entirely replace the older sovereign right to take life (the “juridical code that links law to sovereignty, in which law is armed with the sword”; Francois Ewald in Mills 185). In contrast to the power to take life, *biopolitics*, involved techniques drawn from epidemiology and public health, that preserved life at the level of species and population -- in Foucault’s words its power was to “make live and let die.” Once populations are conceived “*biopolitically*” argues Foucault, it is

much easier to mobilize them for “total” war, or, alternatively, manage them on industrial terms -- terms that make genocide thinkable. Importantly, the sole political form that Foucault envisages as allowing the state to “exercise the old sovereign right to kill” in the midst of the new life-preserving biopolitical regime is racism: “once the state functions in the biopower mode racism alone can justify the murderous function of the state” (Foucault 256). Agamben backdates (and dehistoricizes) this account of biopower, so that the power of exceptional abandonment becomes sovereignty’s defining ontological characteristic, displacing other political models organized around contract or right.

Neither Foucault nor Agamben consider the colonial relevance of their ideas at length, but if we recall Hannah Arendt’s (1985) persuasive conceptual linking of imperialism and the rise of fascism, their comments on biopolitics should give us pause for thought. This is especially so in the colonial camp, in which the racist differentiation between colonizer and colonized, expressed as the relative “murderous” power of sovereignty over bare life, meets the state’s *biopolitical* mandate to preserve the existence of the colonized as bare life.⁹ Applying Agamben’s ideas we can argue that the colonial camp-regime is nothing less than a “normalization” of the “inclusive exclusions” of colonial sovereign power: “The camp”, states Agamben, ‘is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but is nevertheless not simply an external space. What is excluded in the camp is, according to the etymological sense of the term ‘exception’ (*ex-capere*), *taken outside*, included through its own exclusion’. The colonial camp is thus a new “juridico-political” paradigm – it is “the structure in which the state of exception – the

⁹ This is a paradoxical conjunction which had horrific consequences in other later British experiments with the concentration camp system during the Boer War.

possibility of deciding on which founds sovereign power – is realized *normally*” (Agamben 1998: 170).

*

British colonialism never had the resources or power to exert a full “biopolitical” hold over the subcontinent (Guha), but in the late nineteenth century two “natural” phenomena, famine and epidemic diseases, were the triggers for unprecedented biopolitical interventions in Indian society. Both prompted exceptional emergency legislation, and, as Indian nationalism grew, both provoked notable political responses. The colonial mismanagement of Indian famines became the basis for a coherent anti-colonial economics (“drain theory”) in the work of Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt, and epidemics such as plague elicited more violent responses in riots and the assassination of colonial officials. Kipling’s choice of famine as a literary subject early in 1896 anticipates terrible famines in India between 1896 and 1897, and 1899 and 1902, but the historical basis for “William the Conqueror” is evidently an earlier famine which struck the southern presidency of Madras in 1876--8. The details of this disaster, which coincided with extravagant celebrations in Delhi to mark Victoria’s investiture as “empress of India”, bring the sovereign politics of “William the Conqueror” into stark perspective.

In Kipling’s short story, the management of the southern famine is presented as administrative *tour de force*. Scott and Martyn repeatedly praise their boss Jimmy Hawkins’s organizational ability, and relief-work figures throughout as careful humanitarian aid in the face of indigenous carelessness and intransigence. (An Indian apothecary tries to abscond; famine victims who are given grain demand rice.) The

presiding trope of Indians' inherent helplessness is the abandoned children that both Scott and William gather and nourish, parentally, as the famine progresses.

Elsewhere, the work of famine relief is presented as a form of personal charity, and administrators such as Scott are depicted meeting the unseen expenses of famine relief themselves, paying for "cart repairs [... and] all sorts of unconsidered extras" (Kipling 1987: 339).

These potent representations of colonial sovereignty-as-charity are belied by the methods of Hawkins's historical counterpart, Sir Richard Temple, who was appointed as the Madras Famine Delegate in 1876 by the viceroy, Lord Lytton. Determined not to over-spend on poor-relief, Temple took a harsh line (reflecting the influence of Malthusian doctrines and free-market economics in colonial administration): refusing to regulate food prices and forcing starving Indians into labour camps where they worked on canal and railway construction. Relocation to these camps involved a "distance test" in which inmates were refused work within ten miles of their homes. In his research on the conjoined climatic and administrative causes of famines in the late nineteenth century, Mike Davis outlines the grim biopolitical calculus devised by Temple as he captured the "bare life" of his victim-labourers, reducing their rations to a pound of rice per day. In spite of warnings, the "Temple wage" combined with heavy work and bad sanitation soon transformed Temple's labour camps into extermination camps (Davis 40). Widespread "famine strikes" followed as Indians refused to enter camps and organized themselves in early "passive resistance" campaigns led by nationalists like Mahadev Govind Ranade. By the end of the famine, Indian mortality was estimated at between 6 and 10 million deaths, prompting the radical journalist William Digby to respond to Temple's claim that the Madras famine had been brought under control by stating bluntly "a famine can scarcely be

said to be adequately controlled which leaves one fourth of the people dead” (Digby in Davis 40)

This disturbing colonial biopolitics, in which the labour camp becomes a site of strategic abandonment (the *ex-capere* “taking outside” or “letting die”) of whole communities of the rural Indian poor, is both the basis for Kipling’s story and the thing the text “cannot say” (Macherey). Indeed, the very choice of this particular context for a romance indicates the extent of the epistemic violence performed by Kipling’s fiction, as it revises the history of colonial famine-relief (and nationalist resistance) and marginalizes the famine’s numerous nameless victims as a “rush of wailing, walking skeletons” (Kipling 1987: 329). Contrasting with the implacable labour-economics of the 1876 famine, the advent of “scarcity” in Kipling’s narrative is simply resolved in the altruistic, efficient work of distribution. Encountering illness and privation in the line of duty, Scott’s deferred engagement to William becomes the moral reward for self-denial in the face of what is always assumed to be a natural disaster.

Yet, even as Kipling fictionalizes and carefully re-imagines the history of colonial famine, it is evident from his descriptions of the famine relief camp in “William the Conqueror”, that this is a space of sovereign exception and suspended law. Here administrators like Jimmy Hawkins and Scott are able to disregard colonial governmental authority because its power has been delegated to them. Scott, we are told, is “as free as Jimmy Hawkins -- freer, in fact, for the Government held the Head of the Famine tied neatly to a telegraph wire, and if Jimmy had ever regarded telegrams seriously, the death-rate would have been much higher” (Kipling 1987: 331). Repeating the figurative register of sovereignty noted earlier, we find this delegated power symbolized in William’s easy accommodation to extra-legal

jurisdiction: “William [...had] taken kindly to the operations of the Famine Code, which, when famine is declared *supersede* the workings of the ordinary law” (my italics). “Scott saw her, the centre of a mob of weeping women, in a calico riding habit and blue-grey felt hat with a gold puggaree” (Ibid. 330). William’s depiction as a monarch crowned with gold is unmistakable here, transforming her into quasi-divine force of law: a grounding point of all colonial sovereign authority (see Benjamin 297).

We are left, in conclusion, with the somewhat unresolved issue of the unusual gender “transactions” in Kipling’s famine romance, and their connection with sovereign politics of the text. Commenting on the colonial “domestic” sphere, Kaori Nagai argues “the model of Victorian domesticity to be propagated throughout the empire inevitably assumed a public and masculine character”, and notes that in Kipling’s story “Scott becomes a surrogate mother, so that Victoria’s sovereignty appears masculinized in response to the helplessness of the numerous (Indian) mothers it supplants” (Nagai 2006: 127). In this reading, the “trans-gendering” of William *and* Scott becomes a reciprocal manoeuvre in which both evoke Victoria as sovereign, both refiguring their duty towards the “abandoned” life of the colonized as one of maternal care. This perceptive interpretation captures Kipling’s political aesthetic, but elides the fact that the famine-relief operation in the story is not just a *symbolic* evocation of sovereignty, but part of a narrative representation of larger historical patterns of colonial governance as regulation and exception.

In his famine-romance Kipling plays on the routine “modifications” of gender-relations in the Raj (across the domestic and expanded social spheres), but also draws, covertly, on a whole tradition of Mutiny-romances, probably familiar to the readers of the *Gentlewoman* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*, in which gender is, as we have seen, mobilized and transformed around a crisis. In this sense, Kipling’s famine-relief camp

effectively *stands in* for the Mutiny setting that had become a commonplace of colonial romance. In trying to make sense of the potentially threatening gender-transactions that occur in the text, we must remember therefore that they occur in a generic space of legal exception (the famine-relief camp, the frontier, the besieged Mutiny-station).

For Kipling this exceptional space is celebrated as an escape from bureaucracy, but is also inherently dangerous, because within it colonizer and colonized are caught in a circuit of power and powerlessness beyond/within the law, where limitless freedoms open up: freedoms that the colonizer wields as a sovereign prerogative and that the colonized experiences as exposure to colonial violence. Kipling's other parable of "exceptional" sovereignty, "The Man Who Would be King", shows what happens when the freedoms of delegated (or self-arrogated) sovereignty go unchecked, and supplant state-authority. Here, the wrong kind of cross-racial "romance" ends disastrously, and Daniel Dravot's ambitions are punished by a terrible "regicidal" death. Elsewhere in Kipling's writing, the power of sovereign exception is wielded cruelly against erring Anglo-Indians by their own communities, in brutal instances of scape-goating, *charivari*¹⁰ and ostracism.

No such fate awaits William and Scott -- although Martyn anticipates a terrible "ribbing" when the Anglo-Indian community hears of Scott's feeding of Indian children with milk from his goats: "What a lark! I'd have given a month's pay to have seen him nursing famine babies [...] He'll be *Bakri* [Goat] Scott to the end of his days" (Kipling 1987: 338). Instead, their "trans-gendered" courtship is allowable precisely because its "exceptional" setting is temporary, and ends as the famine does.

¹⁰ The club-room scene in Forster's *A Passage to India* encodes many of these symbolic tensions. For a more detailed discussion of the cultural dynamics of *charivari* as a form of colonial exception, see Tickell *The Massacre at Night: Violence, Terror and Insurgency in Indian Fiction 1830-1947* [Forthcoming].

(In this the story's structure recalls the inverted world of Shakespearean comedy, in which romance emerges from confused identities and an interruption of the normal symbolic order, only for the world to be re-ordered in the conclusion). Like the Mutiny narratives with which it shares so much, "William the Conqueror", rather than figuring gender in new ways, co-opts an "exceptional" presentation of gender for conservative political purposes (thus defusing the threat of women's suffrage and their actual participation in politics). In the process, it overwrites the momentous structural violence of colonial economics in the late nineteenth century in a narrative of companionate duty shared by colonial men and women alike.

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