

A Black Athena in the *Heart of Darkness*,
or Conrad's Baffling Oxymorons

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Joseph Conrad has been widely criticized for his portrait of the African woman who appears toward the end of his African novella. Most commentators consider her exclusively as the embodiment of the savagery inherent in the continent, and thence they pronounce an aggrieved or enraged condemnation of the novelist for having written such a Eurocentric and misogynistic portrait. Undoubtedly many of his feminine portraits, in particular of "native" or "mixed-race" women, are open to criticism. Our general contention, however, is that the case in point is different, and we will consequently often have to run counter to current generalizations about the character. For instance, in most accounts of the novella, the African woman has become Kurtz's mistress, although the word never appears in the text. This status, considering the conditions then prevailing and the clichés circulating at the time, may well be what Conrad had in mind. But precisely, it is significant that he should have refrained from writing the word, as if perhaps he did not want to evoke the stereotype. Thus, the African woman does not explicitly figure on the famous list of Kurtz's possessions: "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—," nor in Marlow's echo of it (*Heart* 116, 147). In a very perceptive article, Gabrielle MacIntire observes that in *Heart of Darkness* women have no names, being reduced to the status of men's appendages, or, as one might say, to mere possessive cases: Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's Intended, the company's two women, the accountant's laundress.¹ But MacIntire neglects to point out that the expected phrase, Kurtz's mistress, is never to be found.²

After having labeled the African woman as mistress, most critics then proceed to pile on her derogatory qualifiers, for which Conrad is seemingly to blame. She is "the savage woman" throughout an article by Johanna M. Smith titled "Feminine Criticism and *Heart of Darkness*"; and in a study of the literary image of the "femme fatale," Rebecca Stott writes that "the savage mistress [. . .] becomes an emblem of death" (Smith 182ff; 130–31). Abdul JanMohamed, intent on exposing the Manicheism of some writers, bluntly calls her a "dark, satanic woman" (90).³ Even the verb used in MacIntire's evocation of the character—"She *struts* along the riverbank"—has slightly disparaging overtones and does not seem to correspond to Conrad's intentions, since "strut implies a pompous or theatrical affectation of dignity" (emphasis added; MacIntire 260; Webster's 797). So the task ahead of us is a delicate one. No doubt prejudiced about the preconceptions we think we detect in a majority of interpretations, we would like to offer a reading of veiled connotations—not all of them perhaps intentional—which to our knowledge have not been fully exploited. And since the paragraphs devoted to the character do not present a static portrait but a kind of compressed drama, we will in the main follow the successive stages of its unfolding (*Heart* 135–36).

As has often been noticed, a first cluster of connotations centers around the evocation of a war goddess, both on account of some of the character's equipment ("brass leggings," "brass wire gauntlet," and "helmet") and of her whole attitude ("proudly," "she carried her head high") (*Heart* 135).⁴ If we add the somewhat dignified "draped," it is difficult not to think of a goddess from Greek mythology, and the name of Athena immediately comes to mind (*Heart* 135). Yet, contrary to Athena, the African woman carries no weapon, which may give a first hint as to Conrad's intention not to foreground the aggressive properties of the character. She is no Kali, no Durga, who sow death and destruction in their paths. This is why the African woman, walking "with measured steps," is nearer to Athena than to swift-footed Artemis, whose career is notoriously strewn with corpses (*Heart* 135).⁵ Now our reading hypothesis also rests on the composite personality of Athena, which was made up of surprisingly contradictory features. She was indeed the goddess of war, not above setting one hero against another in a fight to the death—sometimes to satisfy her own spite—but she was also the goddess of wisdom, protectress of the city and of domesticity, although herself a fierce virgin.

As a matter of fact, this constitutive duality shows that she descends

from the archaic mother-goddess, who seems to have been the unique and entirely self-sufficient deity of prehistoric man, and therefore combined life-giving and death-giving attributes. With the arrival of the so-called Indo-Europeans, it is generally accepted that the cult of the mother-goddess reigning supreme was gradually superseded by a new one. The Indo-Europeans brought with them their thunder-throwing god, whom the early Greeks adopted as Zeus, although initially he had some difficulties getting his predominance acknowledged. Hence his countless quarrels with Hera, his swallowing of Athena's mother (Metis, i. e., good-counsel), followed by his giving birth to a daughter with the help of a male god alone, thus establishing his complete mastery even in those aspects of life linked with the feminine. As has been noted by the well-known mythographer Joseph Campbell, male gods giving birth are a clear token of the triumph of patriarchy: "[i]n the patriarchal cosmogonies, for example, the normal imagery of divine motherhood is taken over by the father [. . .] as the woman gives birth from the womb, so the father from his brain" (157). Ann Baring and Jules Cashford concisely summarized the process: "'Mother' Nature is depotentiated, and her birth-giving powers are taken over by the male" (335). This momentous shift in the history of mankind took of course millennia to be achieved. So when Marlow declares that "the women [. . .] should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own," he is registering a stage in late Victorianism, but he does not realize he is also alluding to an age-old conflict (*Heart* 115). In this cosmic reshuffling of power, the figure of the ancient goddess split into various subordinated ones, and half the qualities Athena was granted were those traditionally considered as male. This definitely suggested that, to achieve real greatness, a goddess must possess male virtues. Accordingly, in Aeschylus's play *The Eumenides*, she can declare: "But for marriage, I am always for the male, / with all my heart, and strongly on my father's side" (qtd. in Baring and Cashford 337). The Medusa myth is a perfect illustration of Athena's siding with men, since she sports on her aegis the gorgoneion, the head of the Medusa. Perseus had given the gorgoneion to Athena after she had helped him slay the creature, which came to represent the negative emblem of archaic femininity. As Robert Graves commented, "the myth [. . .] is descriptive of the breaking of the Argive Triple Goddess's power by the first wave of Achaeans, figured as Perseus, 'the destroyer'" (245). Indeed, the African woman's "fringed cloths" may be a reminder of the aegis, which, either as a shield or a supple goatskin, was bordered by a

fringe of hissing snakes originating from the severed head of the Medusa (*Heart* 136). But the African woman has disciplined her hair into the neat shape of a helmet—she may be wild-eyed, but she is not wild-haired—while the boar tusks that rendered the Medusa's face frightful to behold are only indirectly present through the brief mention of elephant tusks. Of course Conrad did know about the myth and used its full force elsewhere when he wanted to convey a disquieting image of femininity. Three examples quoted by Bernard C. Meyer show that all gradations are possible from the "writhing flames" of a coiffure, through a glimpse of Aïssa's face ("the slender spikes of pale green orchids streamed from amongst the boughs and mingled with the black hair that framed her face"), to an explicit recoil in front of a character, "exactly as if she had seen Medusa's head with serpentine locks" (299).

In reality, the portrait of the African woman suggests a later stage in the myth, the one alluded to in Sigmund Freud's short text "Medusa's Head." Freud calls this stage "apotropaic" in the sense that the destructive power of the aggressor has been warded off, overcome, and finally turned back on one's enemies (213).⁶ It was the very role devoted to the Medusa's head on Athena's aegis, and this prompts Baring and Cashford to ask, "Is it perhaps the quality of self-disciplined awareness in Athena that can transform the terrifying face of instinct into a protective shield?" (341). Similarly in Conrad's text, the image of the Medusa has been tamed, has lost its horrific character, just like the so-called "attack" on the steamer which "far from being aggressive [was] in its essence [. . .] purely protective" (*Heart* 107).

On the contrary, what is foregrounded is a sharp and paradoxical contrast in the adjectives attributed to the African woman. Indeed, although in such a piece of elaborate writing one would expect the ternary rhythm of periodic prose, binarism prevails, a binarism based on a string of oxymorons. The first terms of the paired qualifiers—"wild," "savage," "wild-eyed," "ominous," as well as "barbarous"—clearly suggest a stereotyped portrait, typical of the popular fiction of the time, but the second elements in the pairs altogether reverse the general impression (*Heart* 146). So, if Conrad wanted to shock the reader into the realization that an African woman could also be "gorgeous," "superb," "magnificent," and "stately," he does not seem to have succeeded (*Heart* 146). Thus most critics either completely overlook those positive terms or take exception to the portrait, like Maggie Humm for instance, who finds that both aspects betray "the fear and desire of the observing white male" (182).

Observation, no doubt, is always distortion—even in the so-called exact sciences—so the least we can do is to try and observe all there is to be seen. For instance, in the sentence that follows the oxymorons, there is an ambiguity—probably a deliberate one—as regards the adjective *pensive*. If it is to be attributed to the wilderness (“pensive forest”), it must have been as provoking for the average *Blackwood’s Magazine* reader as the “pensive” cannibal chief (*Heart* 133, 103). If it is to be attributed to the African woman, it contradicts such typical definition of her as being “superb but mindless” (Cox 46). It may also apply to both, in which case it considerably alters the whole picture, thus paving the way for our interpretation of the end of the passage. It should be added that in this sentence, the assimilation of the African woman with the wilderness in its tenebrous and passionate aspects is presented as Marlow’s speculation,⁷ and the use of modality (“seemed,” “as though”)—admittedly a recurrent trait of Conrad’s style—points nevertheless to a lack of full authorial sanction (*Heart* 136).⁸

The next paragraph opens with a close-up of the African woman’s face, on which Marlow distinguishes “a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and dumb pain” (*Heart* 136). The emotions of sorrow and pain, unexpected as they may seem, raise in fact numerous and significant echoes. Thus Marlow had mentioned before the “desperation” of the son of the murdered chief, the “impotent despair” of the mangroves, the “cry [. . .] as of infinite desolation,” the “complaining clamour” and “mournful uproar,” the “note of desperate grief” issuing from the forest, as well as “the stress of desperation” which prompted the attack on the steamer (*Heart* 102, 105, 107). In other words, at the moment when the Europeans have come to take Kurtz away, the emotions on the woman’s face epitomize the feelings of a continent and of its inhabitants realizing their powerlessness in front of this foreign intrusion. Yet, not every reader will necessarily notice the presence of those emotions in the text, as the following commentary reveals: “Marlow does not guess at inner feelings or, indeed, any possible facial representation of such feelings only her ‘cheek’” (Humm 182). On the contrary, Marlow does try to construe what he sees on her face, and this he tentatively describes as “half-shaped resolve” and “inscrutable purpose” (*Heart* 136). Those two cryptic phrases appear at first to belong to “one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” deplored by the frame narrator, and they are generally not commented on (*Heart* 51). But they prove crucial for a complete understanding of the text, since they unmistakably suggest that the African woman is not pure savage instinct, that

some sort of debate is taking place in her mind. The text does not reveal the real nature of the debate, but simply records its termination when "she stopped as if her heart had failed her," a clear indication of her decision not to carry out her "half-shaped resolve," not to bring her "purpose" to its completion (*Heart* 136).

Now the substance of those two phrases is a matter for conjecture. For our part, we like to propose the hypothesis that, being now in command (she "shouted something" and the Africans immediately took up the shout), she had deliberated whether or not to order an attack on the boat in the hope of keeping Kurtz in the inner station (*Heart* 146). But her heart failed her when she realized the attack would lead to a blood-bath, since the Africans had no firearms. The decision is not due to fear, as she "did not as much as flinch" when Marlow pulled the whistle and the other Africans fled in terror (*Heart* 146). In short, she showed the same quality of "restraint" Marlow had admired in the cannibals (*Heart* 105). The Europeans, for their part, betray a sore lack of it: not only Kurtz—he "lacked restraint," "a soul that knew no restraint" (*Heart* 131, 145)—but also the Russian trader who is quite ready to shoot her, and the crowd of pilgrims who will soon be opening gunfire (*Heart* 147).

Although restraint in a war goddess may appear at first a somewhat paradoxical feature, it was quite in conformity with the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy in Greek mythology which allotted to Ares the role of the un-reflective, un-restrained god of war. Numerous clashes are recorded between Athena and her impetuous counterpart, out of which she always came victorious. Thus for Baring and Cashford, "the myth of Athena explores above all the quality of reflection, and her stories often compose a meditation on the value of thinking something through or seeing beyond the immediate response to an event [. . .] the quality of restraint is the value she embodies" (345, 339). As the African woman is now standing still, Marlow can describe the surprising impression her eyes make on him: "She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance" (*Heart* 136). This attempt at maintaining a visual contact with the Europeans might be understood as an appeal aimed at having Kurtz given back to her, and in the process, the African woman's somewhat symbolical portrait becomes partly humanized. This pleading glance cannot be more in contrast to the petrifying gaze of the Medusa or to the impact of Nina's eyes in *Almayer's Folly*: "She [. . .] fastened her eyes on his in one of those long looks that are a woman's most terrible weapon" (171). In addition, the African woman's insistent look is followed by a sudden throwing

up of her arms above her head. This gesture may signify that she is taking her cue, not from a supposedly intinctual earth, but from a more reflective heaven, just as one could perhaps fancy, in the background, Athena raising her arms to invoke Olympian wisdom.

It becomes now easier to understand in what sense the text calls her a “tragic” figure (*Heart* 136, 160). The term signals that she has reached the very stage when the hero of tragedy realizes that he is trapped by the situation, that he is being defeated by forces stronger than himself. In a later paragraph of the novella, this term will link the African woman with the Intended, each woman, in her own way, having been betrayed and deprived of power.⁹ Moreover, Conrad adds an explicit allusion to her “powerless charms,” flatly registering the fact that Africa was not in a position to repulse European invasion (*Heart* 160). Indeed, at the end of the paragraphs under scrutiny she vanishes into the dusk, and the evening shadows that quickly spread, “gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace,” are but a mock menace to the well-armed Europeans, contrary to this completely gratuitous prophecy: “The savage mistress will bring down in death with her outstretched arms as easily as she will bring down the twilight” (*Heart* 136; Stott 131). Her disappearance from the scene reminds us of Marlow’s statement about women being “out of it,” not because like his aunt or the Intended, who have been kept away by society from the main currents of life, she has no notion of reality, but because the balance of power is not in her favor (*Heart* 115). Consequently, it would not be totally incongruous to sense elegiac undertones at the end of this passage, as Marlow is certainly not rejoicing, overtly or covertly, at the disempowerment of Africa, and more particularly of the African woman.

We have thus far presented a different angle of vision on the African woman, but it is manifest that for the novelist the character is not a purely admirable figure of resistance. The whole context implies, although it is never stated, that she most probably partook in witchcraft and may even have assisted Kurtz in his “unspeakable rites” (*Heart* 118). One should perhaps also consider the fact that twice she is noted to move toward the left, which is supposedly the side of regression. On the other hand, the positive connotations we have underlined clearly indicate that Conrad could not satisfy himself with an unreservedly negative picture of Africans.¹⁰ At the time, he had of course no idea he was entering the perilous waters of what would become a disputed issue of postcolonial literature, namely representing the other. We saw that many participants in the debate consider that Conrad is to blame

for having offered a stereotyped image of African savagery. Alternatively, if the hypothesis concerning Athena is correct, other critics would then accuse him of a eurocentric bias for having introduced in an African context a figure highly symbolic of the "civilized" West. But all things considered, this never-ending controversy is perhaps inevitable since the simple fact of putting pen to paper always exposes a writer to being extolled or censured.

In Conrad's creation of the African woman, we have tried to show that he kept his pen under control and wrote a carefully weighed portrait, based on strict oxymorons and instinct with meaningful implications. And yet, Greek mythology could have provided him with unbounded possibilities for sensationalism. He did use mythology in many passages of his works, including the end of the novella when Marlow is faced with another representation of femininity, the Intended. Immediately after an allusion to Kurtz's last words, "the summing up whisper of his eternal condemnation," Marlow experiences the typical dismay of Conradian heroes faced with what they should not have seen: "I asked myself what I was doing there, with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold" (*Heart* 157). Marlow's apparent lie will soon convert this whispered "horror" into "your name," so that if the name of woman is "horror," we are irresistibly reminded of Freud's "Medusa's Head," which he associates with "the horror," the "horrifying effects" induced by the sight of the female genitalia and the fear of castration (*Heart* 161; "Medusa's" 212-3). Conrad, on the contrary, in constructing the portrait of the African woman, resisted the lurid potentialities offered by the myth, toned down the references to the Medusa, and chose instead to allude to a goddess refusing to be implicated in sex. A good example of this "restraint" in *Heart of Darkness* is the suppression from the final edition of a sentence that appeared in the passage about women and the Intended being "out of it" (115)—a sentence where the monstrous vagina dentata can hardly be missed: "That's a monster-truth with many maws to whom we've got to throw every year—or every day—no matter—no sacrifice is too great—a ransom of pretty shining lies—not very new perhaps—but spotless, aureoled, tender" (*Heart*, Ed. Kimbrough 49). In other words, even though the ambiguities, conflicts, and panics may not have disappeared, for once they were kept in abeyance.

In the last resort, if one wants to assess the general effect of the portrait on the reader, Freud's category of the uncanny may be helpful. The

uncanny, as he defined it, is a paradoxical combination of opposites, a surprising coexistence of the familiar and the unfamiliar (*das Heimliche* and *das Unheimliche*), and it often manifests itself by the presence of disquieting doubles (as here the Intended) or when something which ought to have remained hidden comes to light. But given Conrad's reticence, one might perhaps speak here of an attenuated or inverted uncanny, in the sense that something which ought to have come to light remains partly hidden. In reality, the distinction soon proves artificial, as canny and uncanny are eventually interchangeable. They have the same unsettling effect and must surely account for our own variously perplexed reactions to the portrait of the African woman.

NOTES

1. The accountant's blush over the laundress signals a transgression of racial barriers, in spite of the scorn and disgust usually professed toward the Africans (*Heart* 68).

2. Alternatively, Richard J. Ruppel insists on the absence of the term mistress, though his focus on "homosocial desire" leads him to find "Her sexuality [. . .] debilitating and, ultimately, deadly: Kurtz's liaison with her is the ultimate sign of his degeneration in the jungle" (158–59).

3. R. Zhuwarara finds her "majestically alluring yet with a gaudiness which is gratuitously repellent" and endowed with "demonic" and "morally dangerous" "sexuality" (31).

4. Peter Firchow approaches the African woman as I do here, except that Firchow, ironically echoing Achebe, calls her "the Black Amazon" (24, 25). Firchow also cites parallels with the Dido/Aeneas story, but I find the correlation with Athena more appropriate, since it is not centered on war and evokes the myth of the Medusa.

5. Jacquetta Hawkes finds Athena "a fine balance of masculine with feminine traits": "warlike goddess of victories" and "womanly protectress of cities"; interested in "man's most intellectual pursuits" and in "weaving and other female skills," etc. (19).

6. Similarly the blood of the Medusa could be either beneficial or lethal. In that respect, it possesses the same duality as Jacques Derrida's "pharmakon."

7. With such terms as "fecund," "tenebrous," and "passionate," Conrad embarked on dangerous generalizations about a whole continent. But these qualifiers are less scornful than those used for whites: "rapacious and pitiless," "sordid buccaneers [. . .] greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage," "less valuable than donkeys," "mean and greedy" and "imbecile" (*Heart* 65, 87, 92, 147).

8. The more categorical "like the wilderness itself" appears later in a fairly positive context (*Heart* 136).

9. Similarly, C. B. Cox, after conceding that "this splendid savage" may be more "attractive" than the Intended, nevertheless adds: "Yet there is something

detestable, even loathsome, about this primitive creature [. . .] Co-habitation with this superb but mindless creature degrades Kurtz" (46). For his part, Chinua Achebe considers that Conrad values the Intended more than the African woman, "a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman [. . .] but perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other" (6).

10. See my analysis of the vocabulary pertaining to Africans in "Conrad et les autres."

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