

The Body Writes Back: Self-Possession in *Mr. Meeson's Will*

By Kellie Holzer, Virginia Wesleyan College

<1> Ever since Andrew Lang's 1887 ditty celebrating the publication of *She*, literary critics have touted H. Rider Haggard as "King Romance."⁽¹⁾ Although Haggard's popularity as an imperial romance writer flagged in the early twentieth century with the waning of the British Empire, historians, biographers, and literary critics have since re-focused their attention on Haggard's experiences in South Africa and his colonial adventure fiction.⁽²⁾ Meanwhile, his domestic novels—those set primarily in contemporary England and preoccupied with issues of marriage, property, and inheritance—have been ignored or dismissed as commercial failures and "potboilers" (Pocock 59, Coan 14). While the domestic fictions *The Witch's Head* (1885) and *Jess* (1887) were received with some enthusiasm by Haggard's contemporaneous readers, the novel under consideration here, *Mr. Meeson's Will* was rarely mentioned except to disparage it. One early fan of Haggard's imperial romances dismissed *Mr. Meeson's Will* as "trash."⁽³⁾ According to Liliastrom's biography of her father, *Mr. Meeson's Will* was nothing more than "an amusing skit on the Law Courts" and "a book for which he never cared, but was forced to write under a contract he had entered into" (136-7).

<2> Recently, literary critics have begun to show more attention to *Mr. Meeson's Will*, whose plot seems to lend itself to feminist interpretation. These critics argue that the way the novel's heroine acquires a tattoo of a dying man's will on her back is evidence of a culturally widespread misogynistic response to the rise of the New Woman. For instance, Garrett Stewart reads *Mr. Meeson's Will* as part of a "strain of late Victorian writing concerned with the entrance of the woman into the marketplace of ideas" (157), a "parable of gendered inscription" (160), and an example of how Victorian novelists reduce the female figure to an inscribed body, a "material exhibit for the deciphering masculine voyeur" (157). Following Stewart, LeeAnne Richardson argues that the heroine is nothing more than a blank page: "Haggard takes and inflicts great pains to subvert the feminism of the New Woman in the novel.... Before the tattooing, she struggled against male domination. Now she ... becomes a blank page inscribed by male authority" (74). Even more recently, Patricia Murphy claims that "the tattoo marginalizes, controls, and punishes the novel's main character, a successful woman writer, for appropriating male privilege. ... Language becomes not a tool under her control, but a weapon wielded against her" (229).

<3> In contrast with such pessimistic readings, I see Augusta not as a New Woman victim of an overwhelming patriarchal power but as a gutsy survivor and as the sort of authoritative feminine self only made possible through imperialism's gendering of colonial space. Patriarchal power is

certainly at work in the novel; however, English patriarchal power must be understood as part of a larger structure of power, British imperialism, a structure constituted of force and coercion, of course, but also of resistance and “writing back” as postcolonial theorists have phrased it. In such a context, the heroine Augusta’s tattoo is not only—or necessarily—a signature of patriarchal inscription; it also evokes ritualized practices of commemoration, social belonging, and identity formation. If we understand tattooing as an unstable technology of self-fashioning, we can read Augusta’s tattoo as a generative condition. Thus while this article joins prior feminist interpretations that attend to Haggard’s uneasy figuring of the woman writer, by analyzing the novel’s ironic linkage of “savage” practices of cultural inscription—the tattoo and the publishing industry’s exploitation of hack writers—I show that *Mr. Meeson’s Will* is important within Haggard’s oeuvre for the way it imagines a kind of liberation for its heroine, granting her an unprecedented degree of self-possession through her vocation as a popular writer.

<4> My reading situates this domestic novel firmly in the larger imperial framework in which it was produced to explore how *Mr. Meeson’s Will* dramatizes the way that metropolitan subjectivities like the feminine “authoritative self” are shaped outlandishly, so to speak, out in the colonies.⁽⁴⁾ I call *Mr. Meeson’s Will* a domestic novel, but that designation requires some qualification, given the disputes over Haggard’s unique form of realism.⁽⁵⁾ Like all domestic novels, it is preoccupied with money and marriage: the plot hinges on whether Eustace Meeson will inherit his uncle’s fortune, and it concludes with Eustace and Augusta’s courtship and marriage. But Haggard layers these traditional preoccupations of domestic fiction with concerns about the exploitation of the (feminized) common writer, and he disrupts the domestic plot by sending key characters—Augusta and Mr. Meeson—on an eventful detour through the colonial sphere. In so doing, this domestic fiction brings to our attention the supplementary role of the colonies in the production of British identities and cultural forms. But more importantly, the novel finally achieves, through its ironic use of the “savage” tattooing incident, both a scathing criticism of the plight of the common writer, and a stunning redistribution of power between the sexes by the novel’s end. This essay links the feminization of writing labor in England with the gendering of colonial sphere and the subsequent re-fashioning of gender roles in the national domestic sphere.

<5> *Mr. Meeson’s Will* tells the story of Augusta Smithers, an impoverished author of the bestselling sentimental novel *Jemima’s Vow* who has been entrapped in an exploitative contract by the publishing magnate Mr. Meeson. When Augusta goes to Mr. Meeson’s offices to ask for more money to save her dying sister, Mr. Meeson cruelly refuses to break her contract, reminding her that he owns anything she writes for the next five years. After Augusta leaves his office, Mr. Meeson’s nephew Eustace, who overheard the exchange and instantly fell in love with Augusta, defends the writer. Unused to being defied, Mr. Meeson promptly disowns Eustace. Meanwhile, following her sister’s death, Augusta decides to immigrate to New Zealand. This attempt to escape Mr. Meeson’s reach is foiled, since he is on board the same ship en route to the Australian branch office of his publishing house. This ship wrecks off the shores of Kerguelen Island in the South Indian Ocean. Augusta survives the wreck, along with Mr. Meeson, the infant son of the colonial governor of New Zealand, and two inebriate sailors. Once the survivors reach the island, Mr. Meeson falls ill and decides to revise his will and restore Eustace as his sole heir. Augusta determines that a tattoo is the only possible method for recording the new will, as the castaways lack anything else that would serve as parchment. Using the ink of a cuttle fish, one of

the sailors inscribes the new will on Augusta's nape and shoulders. Mr. Meeson and both sailors die, and Augusta and the child are rescued and returned to England. As a shipwreck survivor, Augusta returns a media heroine, a public role that makes it easy for the infatuated Eustace to find her. Just after she shows Eustace the tattoo of Mr. Meeson's will, Eustace proposes to her. A photographic facsimile of the will is filed and a sensational probate trial ensues. After much legal wrangling, the will is declared valid and Eustace the beneficiary. Eustace and Augusta marry, and together they transform Meeson's Publishing House into a more just business. The novel ends not with the birth of the next Meeson heir, but with the scene of Augusta working on a new writing project.

<6> As I've indicated, recent feminist readings of *Mr. Meeson's Will* focus on the tattoo as a disciplinary device, a literalization of the concept of cultural inscription described in Foucauldian terms as a body "totally imprinted by history" (qtd. in Butler 1999, 165). But I am interested here in how the novel suggests that the inscribed body "writes back." Scholarly emphasis on omnipotent disciplinary regimes(6) risks overlooking the interaction of cultural inscription and modes of (bodily) resistance. My analysis is inspired by post-colonial theories that view empire not as a unified, stable, omnipotent power but a structure of shifting and often inconsistent identities and loyalties. Considering the post-colonialist dictum "the empire writes back," I suggest that the instances of cultural inscription in the novel do not obliterate the characters' means of self-determination. As my historical archive illustrates, the imposition of imperial state power, if characterized as a disciplining cultural inscription, is often countered by what we might call body language. Thus Augusta's tattoo, like all traces of cultural inscription, also functions as a generative condition, locating her in social networks that are themselves unstable, and giving her the capacity to change those networks. Ultimately, the tattoo becomes an emblem of the relative authority and agency she enjoys as a (gendered) English imperial subject.

<7> First published in June 1888 in the *Illustrated London News*, *Mr. Meeson's Will* plays with themes of dispossession, but it subordinates questions of landed property and inheritance to questions of intellectual property and remuneration. All of Haggard's domestic fictions (and many of his romances) are thematically concerned with property and dispossession, containing plots that revolve around issues of marriage and inheritance (of physical traits as much as estates). They are primarily set in England, though selected male and female characters travel to foreign lands—often to, or near, portions of the British Empire—before returning to England where the inheritance issues (or marital obstacles) are resolved. *Mr. Meeson's Will* includes all of these elements, but it frames the problem of property ownership in two distinct ways: Eustace's legal right to his uncle's estate and Augusta's right to the intellectual property comprised of her writing. Augusta is emblematic of the struggles faced by popular writers at the time, in that her labor as a writer is cheapened. *Mr. Meeson's Will* explicitly draws our attention to the issues that preoccupied popular writers like Haggard at this point in English publishing history: copyright, piracy, plagiarism, and fair remuneration even for what often amounted to literary hackwork.

<8> Haggard, who seems to have nurtured a life-long ambivalence towards the publishing industry,(7) composed *Mr. Meeson's Will* during a time of transformation in the literary marketplace. In the 1880s, international copyright laws were nascent, transatlantic literary piracy was common, and publishing houses were as exploitative as ever. More successful writers protected

themselves from being cheated by employing a literary agent; struggling writers could apply to the Royal Literary Fund for small grants to sustain them between contracts. (Although Haggard himself employed one of the first major literary agents, A. P. Watt, he ignored Watt's advice on several occasions and got himself into the sort of scrapes that would result in the obligation to write *Mr. Meeson's Will*.) The 1880s also witnessed an increase in the production of cheaper one- or two-volume novels and a growth in literacy that resulted in a more diverse reading public. The popular press was taking off, and writers became polarized between disgruntled craftsmen who complained of the decline in literary standards and mass-market tradesmen like Andrew Lang, Walter Besant, and Rider Haggard (Cross 205).

<9> The expansion of the literary market-place and the mass production of popular reading material stimulated debates about whether writing was an art or an occupation; this discourse was frequently framed in gendered terms. Concerns about prolificacy were projected largely onto women writers, a growing demographic. Yet at this time, the majority of busy popular or hack writers were (still) male: Augusta represents a gendered minority. According to Nigel Cross, women accounted for approximately twenty percent of novelists between 1870 and 1900 (168). Like most "common writers," women novelists were less likely to write laurel-winning novels of ideas than to pump out fashionable pot-boilers in order to support their families. The custom of disparaging female novelists long preceded what some scholars would frame as the New Woman backlash. Women writers had always been associated with "trashy or light" literature, in part because they lacked resources: "Most women simply did not have the leisure to cultivate their talents; they had to dash off fiction at piece rates just to keep a roof over their heads" (Cross 168, 172). Scholars have pointed out that women fiction writers' output was typically likened to uncontrolled reproduction: what women writers lacked in creativity, they made up for in fecundity.⁽⁸⁾ In *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter asserts that female novelists were resented and frequently represented as "mechanically reproductive and regurgative" (77). Richardson points out that in male-authored novels of the times, women writers are depicted as degenerates: "women writers ... reproduce monstrously; they are creative rather than procreative" (58).

<10> While such scholarship calls our attention to the way that women writers were dismissed for being hasty and prolific, it is worth noting that Haggard himself has been the target of similar critiques. Malcolm Elwin concludes his chapter on Haggard by noting that he practiced fiction "purely for making money," and that his imagination was "vivid" but he lacked a capacity for introspection that would have made him great (259, 261). Elwin also comments on Haggard's habit of eschewing careful revision, concluding that the reader's "[d]elight in the vigour of his narrative and wonder at the *fertility* of his imagination are tempered by the regret that a Stevenson could not have revised his proofs" (263, emphasis added). As latter-day critics have noted, Haggard was no less mechanically reproductive or fecund than his female counterparts.

<11> As fiction writing became viewed less as an aesthetic pursuit and more a job, the labor of the "common" or popular writer was increasingly feminized. I use the term "feminized" the way that transnational feminist political and economic theorists use it to describe labor performed by disempowered people, whether male or female. Labor is feminized when it is cheapened or under-valued and performed in the service of persons of higher social status and authority. Feminized labor is seen as flexible, invisible, and temporary if not disposable.⁽⁹⁾ Feminized

labor is most clearly represented in *Mr. Meeson's Will* by the male hack writers employed by Meeson's publishing house who are depicted as prolific rabbits. Meeson's specializes in religious books, work viewed as inferior by mainstream authors.⁽¹⁰⁾ According to Cross, the "religious publishing houses were notoriously mean" (200). Meeson's writers work underground in humiliating and miserable conditions: "Five-and-twenty tame authors (who were illustrated by thirteen tame artists) sat—at salaries ranging from one to five hundred a year—in vault-like hutches in the basement, and week by week poured out that hat-work for which Meeson's was justly famous" (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson's Will* 8). The authors' occupational location in the basement illustrates that their work is literally the foundation of the success of the publishing house, while the neologistic pun on hackwork, "hat-work," maligns their industry. Their prolific production is underlined by the reference to the vault-like hutches—the writers are (re)productive rabbits, fed meager pellets for salaries. They are "tame" rabbits, disciplined, domesticated, and unlikely to revolt against their working conditions. The writers are further dehumanized, their labor further devalued, by the numeric system by which they are designated: "at Meeson's all the employees of the great house were distinguished by numbers; personalities and personal responsibility being the abomination of the firm" (8). Male or female, Meeson's employees are mechanically reproductive hacks working in prison- or cage-like conditions. Years later, in a diary entry dated October 12, 1917, Haggard reminisced about the likeness of the fictional Meeson's to Cassell & Co. Publisher's:

Today I lunched with Mr Spurgeon, the manager of Cassell's, and the head-editor of the firm Mr Flower. [...] I gave them my recollections of Cassell's before their time there, not altogether complimentary all of them, for in those days the firm treated authors like the dirt beneath their feet. I met too the recent chairman of their board, whose name I forgot, who remarked to me laughing, alluding of course to *Mr Meeson's Will*, "They used to call us 'the hutches', didn't they?" (Higgins, 1980, 117)

<12> If the basement hutches provide a colorful illustration of the feminization of the labor of writing, figuring it as cunicular reproduction, Augusta provides something of a counterpoint in that her reproductive capacity is, surprisingly, not belabored at any point in the novel. Augusta's dilemma dramatically exposes the unscrupulous practices of religious publishing firms all the more so because she is a *female* novelist. And drawing explicitly on circumstances from Haggard's life, Augusta's plight replicates some of the common problems experienced by so-called "common" writers: the choice between a one-time sale of copyright or income from royalties and contractual clauses binding the writer to the publisher for a term as long as that of indentured labor in the colonies.

<13> Publishers commonly purchased the copyright of a book for an outright sum, an arrangement that allowed publishers to make substantially more money off a novel than the author.⁽¹¹⁾ Without the benefit of an agent's advice and needing the instant cash the copyright sale would have provided, Augusta had chosen to sell the copyright of *Jemima's Vow* rather than take a royalty agreement that would have paid "seven percent on the published price of the book" (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson's Will* 12). While Augusta asks Mr. Meeson for more money out of the profits from the bestselling novel, Eustace sits quietly in the background, listening in as his uncle cruelly reminds her of the original agreement of "copyright fifty pounds, half proceeds of rights

of translation” (12). This humiliating scene rewrites Haggard’s negotiations with Cassell’s over the publication of *King Solomon’s Mines*. A Cassell’s editor had offered the writer the choice of a ten-percent royalty agreement or £100 for the copyright. Haggard initially agreed to the tempting offer of £100 ready-money, but wisely changed his mind while the editor was out of the room at the quiet suggestion of an unknown clerk who, like Eustace, had been sitting in the background. (12) By recasting his negotiation with the publisher as the victimization of a popular woman novelist, rather than the triumph of a popular male romancer, Haggard underscores the feminization of the common writer’s labor. The sad consequence of Augusta’s disadvantageous sale of *Jemima’s Vow*—her sister’s untimely death—reinforces the potentiality of poverty that ensued when common writers were circumstantially forced to accept unfair contracts.

<14> Another example of how the publishing contract cheapens Augusta’s labor is the clause that binds her to “offer any future work [she] may produce during the next five years to [the] house” on similarly meager terms (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* 12). Mr. Meeson owns Augusta’s labor for five years; the contract formalizes a kind of writer’s indentureship. Augusta likens this circumstance to slavery, accusing him:

“You have entrapped me. You have taken advantage of my ignorance and inexperience, and entrapped me so that for five years I shall be nothing but a slave to you, and, although I am now one of the most popular writers in the country, shall be obliged to accept a sum for my books upon which I cannot live.” (14)

Haggard himself later adopted Augusta’s melodramatic language to describe a similar clause in a contract he had signed with J. and R. Maxwell who had agreed to reprint *Dawn* and *The Witch’s Head* together in a two-shilling edition. The contract obliged Haggard to give to Maxwell’s any novel he might write during the next five years. In “My First Book” he retrospectively complains:

For five long years I was a slave to the framer of the “hanging” clause of the agreement. Things looked black indeed, when, thanks to the diplomacy of my agent, and to a fortunate change in the *personnel* of the firm to which I was bound, I avoided disaster. The fatal agreement was cancelled, and in consideration of my release I undertook to write two books upon a moderate royalty. Thus, then, did I escape out of bondage. (290)

Mr. Meeson’s Will was one of these two novels written to satisfy the deal negotiated by his literary agent with Spencer Blackett, who had succeeded J. and R. Maxwell (*Allan’s Wife* was the second of these novels; see Elwin 249). Transposing the rhetoric of literary bondage into *Mr. Meeson’s Will*, Haggard critically exposes the regular entrapment of inexperienced and struggling writers by the publishing industry.

<15> *Mr. Meeson’s Will* emphasizes that a main struggle in the literary market-place of the 1880s was ownership of intellectual property. The novel’s plot is driven by Augusta’s aim to regain possession of her writing. This aim motivates her staunch vow not to write a word until the contract expires and it drives her to try to escape the publishing contract through emigration to the colonies. While the issue of Augusta’s intellectual property is obscured by readings that see

our heroine solely as a victim of patriarchal violence, in what follows, I suggest that the novel's colonial detour transfigures Augusta from dispossessed lady novelist into an "authoritative self." The labor of daily survival—of managing the castaway community—in no-man's land confers upon Augusta the authority she lacks in the metropolis where her labor had been undervalued.

<16> Parsing the role of women in Haggard's fiction has become quite popular in literary criticism, with many critics using the ambiguous representations of women who are both clever and evil to point out various male anxieties of the late nineteenth century.⁽¹³⁾ Haggard's diverse female characters can indeed be difficult to compartmentalize. On the one hand, the domestic novels contain portraits of unapologetically intellectual women such as Angela in *Dawn* or professional women like Augusta, while the romances exhibit what Etherington has called "dazzling embodiments of feminine power" such as Ayesha in *She* (77). On the other hand, the domestic novels include perfectly drawn villainesses like *Dawn's* Lady Bellamy, and in the romances there are grotesque and even deviant females like the witch-mother Gagool in *King Solomon's Mines* or the woman raised by baboons whose explicit lesbian jealousies drive the plot of *Allan's Wife*.

<17> More specifically, scholars have viewed *Mr. Meeson's Will* as an expression of anxiety about female authorship, centering such claims on the figure of Augusta and debating whether she fulfills the qualities of the New Woman.⁽¹⁴⁾ Richardson contends that Augusta represents a New Woman writer, but that *Mr. Meeson's Will* "represents the figure of the New Woman without her feminism" (70). Intelligent and resourceful, Augusta is "a fully modern independent woman and a successful author," and "clearly a New Woman figure," but one who will never be happy unless she marries (Richardson 68). While Richardson sees Augusta as an independent New Woman who is ultimately domesticated, Murphy reads Augusta as a combination of New Woman and Old Woman who is ultimately and thoroughly punished and dominated. Depicted as conventionally feminine through her sacrificial nature; Augusta "departs from ideal femininity, however, through an extraordinary intellect and unusual talent that propel her to the status of a highly regarded author" (Murphy 230). For Murphy, it is precisely this "genius" quality that gets Augusta into trouble: after her "virtual rape" on the island, back in England "the unruly female body is converted into a text under the authority of a legal system created and exclusively maintained by men" (240, 242). Murphy concludes: "in view of Haggard's misogynistic oeuvre in general, as well as the control exerted over Augusta . . . , the novel serves overall as an indictment of the successful woman author" (231).

<18> Although Haggard was writing at a time when Victorian feminisms were flowering—and just as rapidly being trampled by counter- (or mainstream) ideologies—it is not useful to measure Augusta's characterization solely by the standards of New Womanhood—itsself a non-unified identity category—or her fate solely as part of the *fin-de-siècle* backlash against iconoclastic women. Such criticism fails to observe how *Mr. Meeson's Will* not only capitulates to the idea of the working woman writer, but also extends to her some authority and agency. And the English woman's authority and agency actually begin to develop out in the colonial sphere. In this wider imperial space the tattooing marks Augusta as an imperial subject, locating her on an uneven spectrum of power.

<19> It is on Kerguelen Island, a stopping point for European commercial vessels in the South Indian Ocean, that Augusta becomes a civilizing force and an authoritative self. I take the phrase “authoritative self” from Rosemary George’s *The Politics of Home*. George argues that Englishwomen achieved “the kind of authoritative self associated with the modern female subject,” in part, through managing homes out in the colonies (36). George examines imperial romance novels by women writers, as well as colonial conduct books, in which “the British empire was represented as an arena in which English women had hard tasks to perform There was an assumption that the successful running of the empire required the womanly skills of household management” (36). Significantly, this “authoritative Englishwoman,” the female colonizer, is not a New Woman. George contends that “the colonial space and its discourses offered a public role to the white woman that was unmistakably public and yet palatable to a patriarchal, imperial society in ways that the demands of the ‘new woman’ and suffragist were not” (40).

<20> Augusta’s actions on Kerguelen Island make her an exemplar of this modern female figure who is “energetic, domestic, benevolent” (George 40). She is stranded with Mr. Meeson, two sailors, and a small child in a no-man’s land, where social conventions and normative hierarchies of gender and class prove nearly impossible to preserve. Initially, Augusta and the child occupy one of the two abandoned huts found on the beach, while Mr. Meeson bunks with the sailors. The child’s presence instantly lends Augusta maternal authority. Her domestic authority is extended over Mr. Meeson after the dying old man decides to sleep in Augusta’s hut to escape the sailors’ nightly debauches. While such sleeping arrangements might be non-normative in England; out in the empire where domesticity is deficient in privacy,(15) Augusta must make do. Her ability to adapt to these rough circumstances corresponds to George’s examination of the authoritative English woman in India: “the English woman’s challenge, her duty even, is to keep this strange and unmanageable territory under control” (50). While the English woman in the colonies would normally rule her domicile by the side of her husband, Augusta is the sole authority on Kerguelen Island. Her role is supervisory: as Mr. Meeson grows more ill, he becomes just another child for whom Augusta must care. She coaxes him to go to sleep, and later, to eat a biscuit. The degenerate sailors stand in for the native servants Augusta would command in a more settled part of the empire. One of them, Bill, is already tattooed “like a savage”; both are depicted as “brutes” (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* 82, 74). Augusta orders them to put up a flag, forage for food, and help prepare meals (76). Her role is also administrative: she solves the problem of how to record Mr. Meeson’s new will, and she delegates the task of tattooing to Bill. The size of this tiny proto-colony dwindles after the tattooing event: Meeson dies, and the sailors, having participated in a ritualistic midnight “orgie,” tumble off a cliff together (90). Once Augusta is rescued, the authoritative self that has emerged in no-man’s land is reintegrated into metropolitan social networks.

<21> It may seem difficult to reconcile the authority Augusta wields on the island with the tattooing scene, a scene which Murphy reads as a “virtual rape” that destroys any hope Augusta has of self-determination (240, 245). Such an interpretation raises the question, is the agency or volition that Augusta exercises on the island overwritten by the tattoo? The apparent paradox of a self-sacrificing authoritative self may be resolved if we recall that the tattoo is something Augusta herself espoused, and which she can manipulate, hide, or overwrite. That is, if Augusta is a text she is an interactive text. Her tattooed skin marks the interface between the self and the

world; it does not definitively determine her identity. Anthropological theories of identity and the history of convict and emigrant tattooing illuminate the tattoo as an impermanent and manipulable technology of self-fashioning. The tattoo may have a disciplinary function, but this function does not negate the body's own potential for signification. The inscribed subject also uses a kind of body language to produce counter-narratives and as a means of self-determination.

<22> The novel indirectly links Augusta with transported convicts through her tattoo. Her decision to flee to New Zealand in order to evade the contract that binds her to Meeson's publishing house figures her as a fugitive.(16) Ironically, Augusta is following the well-traveled sea route of convicted British criminals as they were transported to the penal colonies in the South Indian Ocean.(17) At the end of the novel, Eustace makes explicit this connection between convicts and exploited writers. After taking over his uncle's publishing business, he abolishes the "horrid system—of calling men by number, as though they were convicts instead of free Englishmen" (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson's Will* 183). However, with the tattoo as a pivotal plot device the novel links Augusta not only to convicts but also to other colonial populations, including various native cultures, emigrants, and even metropolitan British subjects. Forced identity markers for some of these populations, and voluntary identity markers for others, tattoos were also a means of establishing social hierarchies in England as well as in its colonies.(18)

<23> Tattoos, then, were always already multivalent. Modes of bodily inscription like tattooing and branding were deployed throughout sites of the empire as means of identification and as disciplinary or punitive measures. According to Clare Anderson, "As European empires expanded, so did the use of tattooing and branding for the marking and controlling of slaves. At one level, indelible marks designated ownership and, like naming practices designed to strip slaves of extra-European identity, were powerful symbols of unfreedom" (17-8). In the Caribbean, Mauritius, and the Virgin Islands, slaves were "branded for resistance to authority" (18). French convicts were branded with the letters TP for *travaux perpétuels* and deserters of the British imperial army were branded with a D on their sides into the nineteenth-century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the British colonial administration appropriated an indigenous Indian practice of decorative tattooing called *godna* as a means of identifying convicts in subcontinental jails and during transportation to the penal colonies in the Andaman Islands.(19) A counterpoint to this history of forced inscription, a voluntary tattoo tradition, emerged in the west in the latter part of the eighteenth century.(20) As accurately depicted in Haggard's novel, sailors were the primary vehicles for the spread of this practice, though soldiers, officers and colonial administrators also obtained tattoos in conjunction with service overseas. In spite of their increasing visibility in England, tattoos were considered uncouth. Jane Caplan notes that most Victorians viewed tattoos as a mark "of atavism, degeneration and criminality" (1998, 102).

<24> Yet while metropolitan subjects often associated tattooing with cultural degeneration, it is not an understatement to say that *everywhere* in the empire, tattooing was also practiced as a way to construct the self: to transform and reclaim one's identity, memorialize the past, and signal allegiance to or belonging in a group. According to anthropological analysis, the tattoo is a ritual of bodily inscription by which social subjects are produced and social relations reproduced. Margo DeMello summarizes: "modifying the body is the simplest means by which human beings

are turned into social beings—they move from ‘raw’ to ‘cooked’ with the tattoo” (10).(21) The tattoo on Augusta’s body is precisely what “cooks” Augusta—what brings her into the social order back in England and provides her the resources and authority to effect change in that world. A tattoo—self-elected or imposed by an external force—may locate an individual within a social network, but this does not necessarily imply that the individual is deprived of voice or agency. Sometimes a tattoo makes a body an active participant in its own self-fashioning. As Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley put it, “the interaction of the tattoo and the tattooed indicates the mutual constitution of human agency and social structure” (78).

<25> The history of Australian penal convict tattooing reveals one way that the tattoo was re-deployed as a means of self-fashioning. Convicts’ voluntary tattoos functioned as responses to the imposition of imperial power; they comprised “‘popular’ counter-narrative[s] of meditation, resistance and transcendence” (Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley 77). The British Empire transported prisoners to penal colonies in Australia from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. One means of managing the enormous number of convicts in the colonies was the convict indent, a record of personal data including name, age, trade, religion, marital status, number of children, and crimes committed, in addition to detailed descriptions of physical features such as height, weight, scars, moles, and number of teeth. Intended as records of criminal identities, the convict indent may have served to “remind convicts of their status as subjected (and subjectified) objects of ‘panopticon’ knowledge, imprisoned by descriptions of their own bodies and regulated by the internalisation of this knowledge” (Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley 75). The convict indent may have symbolized the power of the penal state to manage transported bodies, but it also records how convicts “wrote back” to the imperial authorities by inscribing protests on their bodies in the form of tattoos.(22)

<26> The content of convict tattoos followed certain conventions: transportees selected sentimental or memorializing images and words to have inscribed on their bodies such as hearts and initials of absent loved ones. Many self-inflicted tattoos were simply inscriptions of the individual’s name, which could be read as a form of protest and self-possession. Other tattoos recorded statements of resistance to the inherent violence of the imperial juridical apparatus and enforced migration. For instance, a seventeen-year-old transported to Van Diemen’s Land had “Land of Sorrows” tattooed on her arm. Some tattoos even encoded a body’s awareness of itself as property of the government.(23) All such tattoos challenged imperial power, since “[o]bjects should not be able to write narratives, especially narratives which give voice to the traumatic nature of their exploitation” (Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley 90). Transported convicts were often used to fill the labor requirements of colonial expansion, thus transportation was another form of indentureship. Tattoos provided a way for these indentured bodies to reclaim their selves, to talk back; tattooing was a form of body language.

<27> The history of Australian convict tattooing and the convict indent contextualizes the tension between cultural inscription and human agency that we see literalized in the literary bond-slave Augusta’s tattooing on Kerguelen Island. This tension—the continual play of subjects being written and writing back—becomes the focus of the last chapters of *Mr. Meeson’s Will*, in which the legitimacy of the tattooed will is debated in the Probate Court. The court scenes dramatize how an inscribed body “has the capacity to change the networks of association within

which it exists” (Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley 78). Although the inscription appears an indelible consequence of a violent ritual, the tattoo functions as Augusta’s condition for agency. When she returns to England, her body is read, in part, as a legal text. However, the narrative explicitly teaches us that a body is not so easily reducible to text, and that being a text and having a voice are not mutually exclusive circumstances—nor is either circumstance so neatly gendered.

<28> *Mr. Meeson’s Will* suggests that *no* imperial subject escapes the interplay of cultural inscription and body language. Eustace, too, is a product of cultural inscription, his identity transformed through cultural tropes written on his body (albeit in a way that differs substantially from Augusta’s tattooing). When Augusta departs for an outpost of the empire Eustace realizes he has fallen in love with her in “a way that brands the heart for life in a fashion that can be no more effaced than the stamp of a hot iron can be effaced from the physical body” (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* 106). Eustace’s “brand” prompts him to action: to salve the pain produced by the “hot iron”—and by separation from his beloved—Eustace reads Augusta’s books. For Eustace, the books metonymically represent the author. Yet the novel insists that Augusta is more than merely textual, as Eustace’s mode of knowing his beloved through reading her writing is undermined. The narrator informs us, “Thus it seemed to Eustace, who knew *Jemima’s Vow* and also her previous abortive work almost by heart, that he was very intimately acquainted with Augusta” (107). Use of the subjunctive “seemed” suggests that the intimacy achieved through reading is indeterminate. The intimacy is also only partial: his “brand” reduces Eustace to helplessly reading Augusta’s “abortive work,” her unpublished remainders. After he proposes marriage, and Augusta demurs on the grounds that they are perfect strangers, Eustace stakes his claim: “really I know you better than you think. I believe that I have read each of your books twenty times” (118). Augusta’s response is a simple protest, like a penal convict’s tattoo: “I am not my books” (118). Eustace replies, “No; but your books are part of you ... and I have learnt more about your real self through them than I should have done if [*sic*] had seen you a hundred times instead of four” (118). The dialogue’s vacillation indicates that Augusta is not reducible to text, though her books are supplemental to her identity. The books come to function as the tattoo does, to remind us that Augusta’s “real self” is fashioned at the intersection of cultural inscription and “writing back.”

<29> The tattoo prompts uncertainty about the borders of “real self”-hood by calling attention to the materiality of the body. Though the novel addresses this uncertainty in the lightest manner with a relentlessly repeated pun on the word “will,”⁽²⁴⁾ the relation of surface or skin to identity or personality is repeatedly unsettled in *Mr. Meeson’s Will*. The courtroom drama that brings the plot to fruition takes up the question, does she or does she not have a will of her own? When the will on Augusta’s back is revealed, the question of the relation of superifice to selfhood arises immediately. Eustace’s barrister James Short reduces Augusta to parchment: “I have no doubt that the young lady’s skin, if carefully removed and dried, would make excellent parchment. At present, therefore, it is parchment in its unprepared stage, and perfectly available for writing purposes” (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* 127). The amusing ambiguity in the last phrase, “perfectly available for writing purposes,” suggests that Augusta is at once a blank page and a writer whose labor is again available for hire, now that Mr. Meeson has expired. During the trial, Augusta’s status as a writing/speaking subject is imperiled by her status as parchment. For instance, a defense attorney objects to Augusta speaking as a witness on the grounds that “her mouth is, *ipso facto*, closed. ... this young lady is herself the will of Jonathan Meeson, and being

so is certainly, I submit, not competent to give evidence” (157). As the question of Augusta’s right to testify comes into play, the attorney continues by arguing that the lady “has no more right to open her mouth ... than would any paper will” (157). The judge challenges this affront, rhetorically framing the dilemma in terms that suggest that the symbolic does not always correspond to materiality:

Is the personality of Miss Smithers so totally lost and merged in what, for want of a better term, I must call her documentary capacity as to take away from her the right to appear before this Court like any other sane human being, and give evidence of events connected with its execution? ... A will is supposed to have been tattooed upon this lady’s skin; but is the skin the whole person? Does not the intelligence remain, and the individuality? (158)

Finally, he reiterates the hypothesis that Augusta’s skin is physically separable from the remainder of her person (i.e. she could be skinned). It is the tattoo’s removability that secures Augusta’s right to testify in court.

<30> The gruesome potential for Augusta to be skinned, and thereby divested of the evidence of her inscription into the social order, apprises us that the skin is subject to processes of “flux and becoming” (W. Cohen xiii). The skin alters with time, the signatures will fade. An unstable marker of social identity, Augusta’s tattoo does provide evidence that language is an enabling condition for matter, for the body, but it is also evidence that language—text, inscription—cannot fully contain materiality; something is always left out. In this case, as the judge kindly clarifies, what remains is Augusta’s *personality*—a term that evokes mind *and* body. Her skin is at once distinct from her “person,” and contiguous with it. The tattoo is an integumentary supplement, a trace of the colonial sphere that is both peripheral and fundamental to her constitution as an imperial subject.

<31> Her marriage to Eustace (albeit another binding contract) no more obliterates her capacity for self-determination than does the tattoo. When Augusta returns to the metropolitan center, though she wears the traces of her colonial experience emblazoned on her skin, the authority she exercised on Kerguelen Island carries over into her new role as a gentleman’s wife. Neither her legal status as wife nor her social status as common writer reduce her to economic dependency. In fact, the novel’s preoccupation with fair remuneration for the common writer historically coincides with married women’s property reforms which represented a large-scale, though uneven, transformation in the condition and legal status of English wives in the 1880s across the empire. Attending to married women’s property reforms offers a new understanding of the way that Mr. Meeson’s will indirectly restores Augusta’s ownership over her writing. The will links Augusta to Eustace (they marry; having inherited the publishing business, he cancels her publishing contract with Meeson’s), and it becomes the fulcrum of her economic liberation as a common writer. This point may be counter-intuitive from the perspective of some academic feminisms, but Augusta’s tattoo, far from marginalizing her, grants her some of the freedoms, rights, and privileges associated with financial security—the sort of financial security afforded by earning one’s wage doing what one loves. We must take into account the legal reforms that grant Augusta financial security as a working wife when we analyze her as a figure of late nineteenth-century femininity.

<32> The “standard Victorian marriage plot” was undeniably altered in fiction when it was altered in law—when wives became property holders themselves, no longer dependent upon their husbands for this aspect of their legal identity. Haggard began writing novels after the Victorian women’s movement had finally managed to reform property law in 1882.⁽²⁵⁾ The Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 provided that a married woman without a settlement (e.g. a poor woman) could keep as her own the earnings from “any employment.” Specifically, “any money, or property so acquird [sic] by her through the exercise of any literary, artistic, or scientific skill ... shall be deemed and be taken to be property held and settled to her separate use, independent of any husband to whom she may be married.”⁽²⁶⁾ The 1882 Married Women’s Property Act extended these rights (and many of the liabilities) of property ownership to all married women and provided that husbands and wives should maintain separate interests in their property: “In effect, the act of 1882 bestowed an equitable marriage settlement upon every married woman who did not have one” (Holcombe 202). Reading *Augusta* in the context of these reforms enables us to view her not as definitively victimized by patriarchy but as a beneficiary of early British feminism.

<33> The route of Augusta’s economic liberation follows the transit of the returned colonial adventurer, that figure who traveled to the Oceanic or South African sites of the empire to mine for gold or other precious resources, and who returned to England as wealthy and marked (often physically) as a *nabob*. The novel’s resolution provides a portrait of the economic privilege Augusta wins through surviving the ordeal of the tattoo. As a generative condition, the tattoo enables Augusta to change the society in which it locates her, for, in the end, it is still Augusta’s productive, not her reproductive, labor that matters. Eustace encourages August to continue working, telling her that he fears that their sudden wealth will dissuade her from writing: “So many women are like this. Whatever ability they have seems to vanish utterly away upon their wedding day” (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* 172). Augusta replies, “Those who really love their art as I love mine, with heart and soul and strength, will not be so easily checked. Of course, distractions and cares come with marriage; but, on the other hand, if one married happily, there come quiet of mind and cessation from that ceaseless restlessness which is so fatal to good work” (173). By “happily,” Augusta perhaps means “richly,” for certainly it is Mr. Meeson’s fortune, in part, that frees her from the unquiet mind and unceasing restlessness that accompany dire poverty. Further, as her reply reveals, the cancellation of the contract that made her a literary bond-slave magically turns writing from an occupation back into an art. Augusta need never be a hack writer again. The novel’s resolution also imagines the end of the feminization of the labor of writing: the hitches are abolished, salaries are raised, and the writers enjoy generous contracts and profit-sharing. Augusta even plans to establish a mini-Meeson’s welfare program, “an institution for broken-down authors” (185).

<34> Most importantly, as I’ve mentioned, Augusta’s productive labor is not supplanted in the end by her reproductive capacity. Just before her wedding it occurs to Augusta that “she was left alone with a great and happy career opening out before her—a career in which her talents would have free space to work” (Haggard, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* 175). The oddest thing about this quotation is not that Augusta envisions a future before her involving a great career, but that she envisions being *left alone*. Does she mean left alone with her husband? Although the plot concludes in a marriage, Haggard provides us with a relatively unconventional, if not revolutionary, closure: we witness a woman sitting down to meaningful work. Rather than

holding an infant, the new heir to the Meeson estate, in her arms, she is last glimpsed ignoring her husband and writing. It is early in the morning (the scene provides an instructive reversal of the denouement of *David Copperfield*): Eustace is sleepily talking at his wife, and “disdaining reply, Augusta worked on” (186).

Endnotes

(1)The poem was addressed to Robert Louis Stevenson as well:

“King Romance was wounded deep
All his knights were dead and gone
All his court was fallen on sleep
In the Vale of Avalon!

Then you came from south and north
From Tugela, from the Tweed;
Blazoned his achievements forth
King Romance is come indeed!” (qtd. in Ellis 119)([^])

(2)Recent examples of scholarship that focuses on Haggard’s colonial adventure fictions to the exclusion of his domestic fictions include Katz, Chrisman, Sandison, and Monsman.([^])

(3)Maurice Baring wrote this in 1889, and recollected it in his 1922 autobiography (qtd. in M. Cohen 235). More recently, Richardson calls *Mr. Meeson’s Will* “predictable” and “prosaic” (74).([^])

(4)My use of the term “outlandish” intentionally echoes Timothy Carens’ insightful book *Outlandish English Subjects in the Victorian Domestic Novel*. Carens tracks how “outlandish stories” resurface in representations of familiar domestic scenes in these novels, concluding that far from reinforcing the strict dichotomies of imperial ideology (East vs. West, savage vs. civilized), domestic novels like *Jane Eyre*, *The Egoist*, or *Bleak House* “expose the presence of ‘home-made’ savagery” (20).([^])

(5)First published in June 1888 in *The Illustrated London News*, *Mr. Meeson’s Will* exemplifies Haggard’s unique form of domestic realism, a mode of realism that is sensationally preoccupied with imperial culture and colonial spaces and artifacts. Although it is punctuated by descriptions of real people, places, and historical events, Haggard’s domestic realism sometimes morphs into melodrama or sensationalism. Etherington writes that Haggard “must stage manage all entrances and exits, piling coincidence on coincidence until drama gives way to melodrama. His realism is

consequently far from realistic” (25). In 1904, J. H. Barron wrote, “In his scenes of social life in England there is a note of artificiality, if not of constraint, which is entirely absent from the brisk action of his ‘veldt’ stories” (296). In contrast to assessments that reduce Haggard’s domestic fictions to anomaly, failure, or generic hybridity (See Richardson 55), I find that *Mr. Meeson’s Will* illustrates how tales of the colonies are supplemental infrastructure for domestic realisms, in much the same way that colonial resources were fundamental to metropolitan economies. In this, my reading of *Mr. Meeson’s Will* is aligned with Timothy Caren’s work on domestic novels. (^)

(6)For example, Murphy sets Augusta’s tattooing incident against the backdrop of the “monolithic authority of the Empire” (232).(^)

(7)Having encountered indifference from publishers at the start of his career, yet needing some respectable way to support his family, Haggard developed a kind of mercenary attitude toward the business of writing novels. In “My First Book,” he apologizes for viewing writing as a job rather than a form of art: “At best I did not expect to win a fortune out of [*Dawn*], as if every one of the five hundred copies printed were sold, I could only make fifty pounds under my agreement ... But as the copyright of the work reverted to me at the expiration of a year, I cannot grumble at this result. The reader may think that it was mercenary of me to consider my first book from this financial point of view, but to be frank, though the story interested me much in its writing, ... any reward in the way of literary reputation seemed to be beyond my reach” (284-5). Although he maintained friendships with certain publishers, in an entry in his *Diary of an African Journey* dated May 29, 1914, Haggard is still complaining about the industry: “The personal touch has gone. After all it is the same everywhere. Take the case of publishers and authors. How different it is dealing with a Charles Longman or a John Murray and one of these new firms of tradesmen whom the writer of the book scarcely ever sees and who, individually, look upon the producer of the raw material with the utmost indifference. *Their* only interest in him is the extent to which his work will or will not sell” (277).(^)

(8)Showalter suggests that the crisis in masculinity prompted by the erosion of traditional gender roles may account for the popular male romance novelist’s apparent hostility towards female writers: “In the 1870s and 1880s, at large English publishing houses like Bentley’s, more than 40 percent of the authors were women. ... Irritation with the fecundity of the successful woman novelist, churning out ill-digested but best-selling trash, surfaces in private journals, as well as in critical essays and stories of the period written by men” (77).(^)

(9)See work by Enloe, Alexander and Mohanty, and Moghadam. (^)

(10)In Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, when Jasper Milvain advises his sister to take up writing religious stories, she asks, “why am I to take up an inferior kind of work?” (qtd. in Cross 200).(^)

(11)Cross relates the story of James Grant, who “sold the copyrights of his popular historical novels to Routledge for between £100 and £250 a time. Between 1856 and 1882 Routledge sold 100,000 copies of Grant’s *Romance of War*: no wonder Grant described authorship as ‘a hopeless treadmill’” (5).(^)

(12)Haggard relates the story in *The Days of My Life* vol. I:

“As it chanced, however, there sat in the corner of the room a quiet clerk, whom I had never even noticed. When the editor had departed this unobtrusive gentleman addressed me. ‘Mr Haggard,’ he said in a warning voice, ‘if I were you I would take the other agreement.’ Then hearing some noise, once more he became absorbed in his work and I understood that the conversation was not to be continued” (232).^(^)

(13)Etherington suggests that Haggard’s representations of women often raised “the specter of female self-sufficiency” and “stand as a revealing glimpse of one perceptive male’s anxieties in an era when legal and social restraints on women were beginning to loosen. What if women did not need men at all?” (84). In her analysis of the death of Gagool in *King Solomon’s Mines*, McClintock contends that “Haggard wards off the threat of a resistant female and African power, ... by violently dispensing with the powerful mother figure in the narrative” (3).^(^)

(14)Richardson writes, “In this novel, male anxiety about the New Woman, female authorship, and authority is literalized” (68).^(^)

(15)George writes, “With the establishment of the English home outside England, there was a physical repositioning of the hitherto private into what had been considered the most public of realms—the British empire” (39). She continues, “The distinctions between public and private, while they were maintained, repeatedly broke down and had constantly to be redrawn” (40-1).^(^)

(16)I am grateful to Ruth Feingold for pointing this out in her response to a much earlier version of this paper presented at the 2005 VISAWUS conference.^(^)

(17)These were some of the British Empire’s earliest penal colonies: New South Wales in southeast Australia (an active penal colony from 1788 to 1823) and Van Diemen’s Land on the island of Tasmania (convicts were transported there from the early 1800s to the 1850s).^(^)

(18)See Bradley 137, 155.^(^)

(19)Outlawed in 1849, penal tattoos were inscribed on the forehead and consisted of the prisoner’s name, crime and the date and place of conviction. They were meant to facilitate penal management and recapture of escaped convicts. However, prisoners found creative ways to “render their bodies individually illegible” by modifying, fading or concealing their markings (Anderson 33). Thus the convicts created a counter-narrative to that of the colonial authorities.^(^)

(20)Historians of the tattoo in the west now consider Captain Cook’s exploratory journeys through Polynesia as a moment of *rediscovery* of the practice of tattooing; see Caplan (2000) and DeMello.^(^)

(21)DeMello’s argument is indebted to Gell’s observation that in Polynesian societies the tattoo plays a large role in reproducing the social order by making certain kinds of subjects out of

bodies/souls: “Tattooing was part of the ‘technology’ for the creation of political subjects, and hence the reproduction of political relations” (Gell 9).^(^)

(22)Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley discuss convict bodies, not as “passive surfaces upon which punishment was inflicted, or as symbols of the moral degeneracy of a quasi-lumpen-proletariat/criminal ‘class’ shipped to the ‘fatal’ shore,” but as “living testament[s] to circumstance” (76, 81).^(^)

(23)In a particularly fascinating example of a body’s effort to repossess itself, one man obtained a tattoo of an arrow with his name beside it. Maxwell-Stewart and Bradley explain, the “broad arrow was the mark placed on government property as a precaution against theft [...]. Here, the government property is Angus MacKay, convict—yet by adding his name to the design, MacKay has repossessed himself. This irony may help explain why so many convicts were tattooed with their own initials or name” (86).^(^)

(24)E.g. does *being* a will—a document—negate Augusta’s own will or volition? The pun is discussed at some length by both Stewart and Murphy.^(^)

(25)The Act came into effect January 1, 1883; Haggard was revising his first novel *Dawn* between May and September 1883 (*Days of My Life* vol. 1, 213).^(^)

(26)*Married Women’s Property Act*, 1870 (qtd. in Holcombe 243).^(^)

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Mr. Meeson, a publisher, was interested only in financial return. One day a girl called at the publisher's office. She had written a story called "Jemina's Vow," which had been one of the best sellers of the year. For it she had received a beggarly sum. The girl needed money to take her sick sister to a warmer climate. Mr. Meeson refused to pay the girl anymore, and reminded her that she was ...Â Mr. Meeson, a publisher, was interested only in financial return. One day a girl called at the publisher's office. She had written a story called "Jemina's Vow," which had been one of the See full summary Â». Director