Johanna Smith, in “‘Too Beautiful Altogether’: Ideologies of Gender and Empire in Heart of Darkness,” argues that Marlow is attempting to revitalize what had become an outdated conception of separate spheres. According to Smith, Marlow is an ideologue who presents his listeners with a new Kurtzian imperialism, in hopes of challenging and helping replace a feminine one. If Smith is correct in her suspicions, she certainly overemphasizes Marlow’s skill as a craftsman and his effectiveness as a spokesman, for his uneasiness with women is obvious in the text, and so too his ineptness in confining women away: he creates separate spheres wherein the masculine one notably includes at least one woman! But in his narrative, imperialism never loses a taint of feminine acquisitiveness, just as “influence” never seems to lose its taint as a feminine power. In fact, given his typical response to compromising situations, it is more accurate to assess Marlow as having far more used his privileged position as narrator to make himself seem a skillful evader than an imperialistic Darth Vader.

Marlow’s fascination with and fear of the power and influence of women is more evident in the text than Smith appreciates. Smith, hoping to emphasize the relevance of feminist analysis, prefers to imagine Marlow as a dangerous opponent. To her, Marlow is effective in construing women as essentially weak and delicate. His power, she tells us, “as the masculine narrator of his story” (Smith 173; emphasis in original), allows him to effectively silence, commodify, and belittle the women in his tale, and only the likes of discursive analytical training, of feminist criticism, will enable us to effectively counter his “narrative aim to ‘colonize’ and ‘pacify’ women” (170). Considering the surety of Smith’s understanding of Marlow’s intentions, and her high estimation of his competence, it is not surprising that Smith passes over evidence that discounts her thesis.

Smith believes Marlow is attempting to reinforce an ideology of separate spheres that was losing its influence by the late nineteenth-century. She believes he is attempting to create an ideology that establishes women as incapable of accepting and/or handling the purportedly hard truths of reality. Yet the first encounter we have in the text (other than with Marlow) with someone whose significant presence owes to her experience with truths of this kind, is the old woman at the Company’s Brussels office. She knows that few of the men that come before her will survive their experiences abroad. She seems “uncanny and fateful” (25), and makes Marlow very
uncomfortable. Smith rightly recognizes the old woman’s associations with one of the three Fates, but does not convincingly explain why Marlow, if he means to establish women as ignorant and incapable of handling Truth, would permit a figure whose Fate-like ability to divine men’s future is never really belittled in the text. The old woman’s callous attitude towards young men is characterized as a realistic and legitimate response to the fate she knows awaits most of those she meets. And it is an attitude that Marlow adopts, and is delighted to mimic, in his own treatment of his attendees onboard the Nellie (50) (and also while in the jungle, resulting in the pilgrims “considering him brutally callous” [87]).

Smith passes too quickly over another surprising association Marlow allows the old woman. Smith reminds us that Marlow portrays her as someone who “‘pilot[s] young men into the Company,’” and suggests that she is being likened to “the pilot who ferries the dead across the Styx into Hades” (175). Smith is aware that if there is an almost reliably exclusive masculine fraternity in the novel it is the brotherhood of seamen (182), of empowered loners, yet does not explore why Marlow, in effect, includes her within this fraternity! Comparing her to someone who successfully ferries doomed souls to the most hellish of places is an especially strange thing for Marlow to do if his intention was to argue that women are simply too delicate to venture abroad.

To be fair, Smith argues that Marlow attempts to “stabilize his masculinity,” a masculinity she recognizes was threatened by the old woman in his relations to his aunt (and also the Intended) (176). She tells us that in his “farewell visit to his aunt, he abuses her lack of experience and debased imperialist rhetoric to construct the ‘sentimental presence’ that can be distinguished from an ‘idea’ and then rejected” (178). Smith, in understanding his encounter with his aunt as one where he uses her, does not allow that it could also be one where he too was used. Marlow himself describes his aunt as “triumphant” (27), and it is possible to read him as more reactive than active, as more a victim than a victimizer in this scene, and to judge his cutting after-the-fact commentary as mostly compensatory in nature.

Certainly it is an encounter in which his aunt’s influence and power in the Company—and potentially over him—is made dear to Marlow, and it is also one in which his aunt has both the tonal authority and assumed right to dominate a dependent attendee we would expect from a matriarch. When Marlow quotes her exact wording, we hear her patronizing tone, her presumed authority: “You forget, dear Charlie [—]” (27). As with the old woman, Marlow feels uncomfortable in her
presence (27). This rebuke follows Marlow’s resisting her—whether simply her idealistic beliefs as we are told, or the entirety of her authority over him, we cannot be sure. His quibble with her views, assuming we trust Marlow’s account of this encounter, was delicately, even meekly delivered: “I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit” (27). It is certainly not clear that his delicacy here owed mostly to civility, or out of respect of his aunt’s own delicate nature. Rather more likely, it owed to his trying to figure out a way to contest her authority, but without thereby inviting upon himself a lecture. That is, he might have moderated his delivery mostly out of fear of reprisals than for any other reason. As it turns out, for his nanoscale show of impudence, he is patronized, lectured at, told to “wear flannel, [and to] be sure to write,” and afterwards is left feeling “queer” (27) and uneasy.

Marlow’s after-the-fact commentary on the supposed absurd nature of women shows he continues to be disturbed by this encounter as he recalls it. His diatribe reeks of retroactive compensation, as if he were still trying to counter the authority his aunt had over him. His assertions of female weakness are therefore compromised, and are hardly ideal for the project Smith believes they are intended to serve; for Marlow cannot well argue for separate spheres based on intrinsic female weakness and male hardiness when he as a man consistently showcases the failings from his own fear and weakness.

Not only does Marlow not manage to stabilize his masculinity in the presence of his aunt, his aunt, more so than even the old woman, continues to “bewitch” (38) his existence in Africa. While Smith misses who really has authority in Marlow’s encounter with his aunt, she is right to assume Marlow hoped his being keen to the true materialistic drive behind imperialism privileged him in some way. But even in Africa he finds that it is only his “dear aunt’s influential acquaintances” (41) which enables. The manager’s agent, the brickmaker, erroneously believes Marlow possesses “influences in Europe” (42), and it is Marlow who recognizes his aunt as the source of his inflated reputation. He tells us that he “let the young fool [. . .] believe anything he liked to imagine as to [his] [. . .] influences [. . .], [but that he also] [. . .] thereby became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims” (42). And it is possible that the reason he compares himself to the bewitched pilgrims is that, despite his denial that there was anyone “behind” (43) him, he knows his aunt’s influence over him remains, that it is substantial, and that it presents him with tantalizing benefits.

The brickmaker, after all, likens Marlow to Kurtz (41). He believes him Kurtz’s
potential competition for General Manager, that is, a rival, a potential equal. And while Marlow, so often forced to bite his tongue, finds nothing more appealing about Kurtz than his “impudence” (47), Kurtz can get away with being impudent only because his connections in Europe make him seem earmarked for General Manager (41). Kurtz’s connections give him some immunity to reprisals (from rivals at least), so his insulting letters to the Central Station’s manager have not affected his star status. Since European capitals are characterized as effeminate places (88), Kurtz’s connections link him, if not to female relations, certainly to effeminate men. If Marlow permitted himself to make use of his aunt’s connections, he would likely become as empowered as Kurtz, or the person Kurtz directly rebuked—the Central Station’s manager—is. However, he is also aware that he would owe his status to his aunt’s efforts, and that this dependence would render him pathetic. He would have power over others, but would conceive of himself as more his aunt’s pet than as someone in charge of a large swath of others. We know this because of the special interest Marlow takes in the manager’s special “boy” (37), and by the way Marlow characterizes the Central Station’s manager.

Other than the brickmaker, the only person at the Central Station who is favored by the manager is “his ‘boy’—an overfed young negro from the coast,” who is to Marlow a despicable figure who “treats the white men, under [the manager’s] [. . .] very eyes, with provoking insolence” (37). The negro’s insolence owes only to his being the manager’s “favourite” (37), and we should not be surprised to discover that the manager is in significant ways a composite of the old woman and Marlow’s aunt. As with the old woman, as with his aunt, the manager is someone Marlow isolates as being able to make others feel uneasy (37) (and he tells us, “You have no idea how effective such a . . . a . . . faculty can be” [37]). It was the old woman’s looks’ “swift and indifferent placidity” (25) that affected Marlow, while it is the “trenchant and heavy” (36) manager’s gaze that affects him. Just as he characterizes his aunt (and women in general), Marlow describes the manager as existing in a bubble:

When annoyed at meal-times by the constant quarrels of the white men about precedence, he ordered an immense round table to be made, for which a special house had to be built. This was the station’s mess-room. Where he sat was the first place—the rest were nowhere. One felt this to be his unalterable conviction. (37)
Like his aunt, the manager expects, demands, and, other than with Kurtz, receives dutiful attendance. And as was also true with her, “he paid no attention to [. . .] [Marlowe’s] explanations” (37).

Marlow comes close to literally running away from the manager. He saves his scathing commentary of him until “he flung out of his [the manager’s] hut” (38). Running away, or turning “his back on” (38) those who unnerve him, is as frequent a response of Marlow’s to feeling uncomfortable as is back-biting commentary. The two reactions usually go together, in fact. He doesn’t fling himself away from his aunt (mind you, as Smith points out, he goes to Africa as much in hopes of distancing himself from the influence of women [176] as to travel to the heart of the jungle), but he feels the sudden need to inform his listeners of how well “used to clear[ing] out for any part of the world at twenty-four hours’ notice [he was], with less thought than most men give to the crossing of a street” (27). His reaction to the Central Station manager is typical in that most often when feeling compromised, he does nothing tricky, he just physically moves away. However, to counter a connection he “acknowledges” between men of the power-hungry Company and their appetite for lies and his own (“Well, I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretense as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims” [44]), he does finally demonstrate what sort of power his entitled position as narrator affords him by imagining himself very far beyond them.

After admitting to some kinship, Marlow returns to the present to lecture his attendees onboard the Nellie. In this instance, he escapes becoming tainted—by traveling through time! He makes use of his narrative power to help persuade himself that, however much he might admit to being a liar, as perhaps akin in some way to Company men, what he still most truly is is a voyager, part of an untainted ancient brotherhood who have remained stalwart and the same since now vastly altered England was herself primordial. To seamen, it is the accomplishments of the human short-term that are unsubstantial. So too, even, the appeals of “secrets of a whole continent” (19). His return to the present is a return then to himself as a “trustworthy” “pilot” (17), to someone used by the unnamed narrator to represent—even if, owing to his wanderings, he isn’t typical of them (17)—all other seamen’s learned incuriosity, even before the most extravagant of discoveries, and is a technique of his (Marlow’s) to escape becoming contaminated by prurience.

Upon his return from his remembrances, and immediately after he finishes
relating his encounter with the brickmaker, Marlow tells his listeners he sought “comfort” (44) onboard his boat. More than this, he tells us/them of his associations with “the few mechanics there were in that station,” who, owing to their “imperfect manners,” were “despised” by the Company pilgrims (44); and of how he also pals-about with a “good worker” (44). Marlow takes pleasure in isolating himself from the Company men by both sharing and identifying himself with the few honest souls around him. Amongst people too “unimportant” (44) to draw attention, too “simple” (44) to be interesting to those fascinated with intrigues and mysteries, but seemingly unaffected by others’ opinion of them, Marlow is happy. It is possible that, more than anything else, the search for such simple happiness is what drives Marlow’s narrative. There is no doubt that women trouble him, and that they are constructed in the narrative as dangerous. There can also be no doubt that he would be delighted if his narrative contributed to keeping men empowered over them. However, he idealizes the peripheral loner so much in the text, while condemning influence and power, that he does not establish any clear means whereby any man or company of men could succeed in constraining women without thereby demonstrating “unbounded” (178) feminine power and impudence.

Smith is correct that Kurtz’s “unbounded eloquence” (176) delights Marlow; but just as Marlow is willing to admit he “was seduced into something like admiration” (71) for the significantly less impressive Russian attendant to Kurtz, it does not necessarily implicate him in holding a high assessment of this sundered man’s over-all worth. Marlow’s own manliness, despite his at times pretending to be immune to continental attractions, actually ultimately depends on his success in resisting them. He knows that Kurtz’s eloquence makes him great; but also that it is entwined with a suspect desire for impudent self-assertion that ultimately is not distinguished from an unbounded and tragic desire for “success and power” (85). Marlow is therefore serious when he claims he is “not prepared to affirm the fellow [Kurtz] was exactly worth the life [a helmsman] [he] [. . .] lost in getting to him” (67). And Marlow is likely relieved, rather than saddened, to find that “[a]ll that had been Kurtz’s had passed of [his] [Marlow’s] [. . .] hands” (90). That is, Marlow, because it guarantees he will not suffer Kurtz’s fate, is glad Fate worked to circumscribe his influence.

Smith knows that what she labels as a Kurtzian imperialism is not something Marlow presents as arising out of the efforts of corruptible Kurtzs, but implausibly implies that it could arise of the “strength of [the] [. . .] homosocial bonds” (182)
established between fellow helmsmen. That is, she thinks it will arise out of men
who steer clear of power and whose virtues include the modesty of their ambitions
and the narrowness of their focus. No kind of colonization is ultimately validated in
the text. This includes Marlow’s commodification of the savage woman, as it brings
to mind associations of the supposed insatiable desire of women for objects as much
as it does the objectifying male gaze. And no hero is presented for leadership of any
colonizing effort. This certainly applies to Marlow himself, who fears old women
almost as much as he does his aunt, and whose sadistic treatment of the Intended is
obviously not evidence of male power but rather of cowardly retribution upon
whatever unfortunate girl proved handy. (The Intended, one of the text’s less
intimidating female/feminine figures, is the woman he revenges himself upon for
feeling consistently awkward in their presence.) Marlow might admire and sometimes
imitate the brutality of the hunter, but he prefers to hide. He takes pleasure in
imagining himself a small anonymous beetle (51), and he is in fact too small and
inconsequential to warrant the extent of the attention of Smith’s scrutinizing gaze.

Works Cited
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