



*Robert E. Howard has been the subject of numerous media, including several biographies and a movie. He is known and well-remembered as the creator of Conan the Cimmerian Kull of Atlantis, and the Puritan demon-hunter, Solomon Kane.*

*His most famous creation by far, Conan has secured an immovable foothold in the popular consciousness, and has created an enduring legacy for an author whose career lasted just over a decade. Unfortunately, due mostly to the Schwarzenegger films of the 80s, this legacy- the image of Conan in the public mind- is an undue blemish on a complex, intelligent character, and on Howard himself.*

*In Defense of Conan the Barbarian seeks to invalidate these stereotypes, and to illuminate the social, political, economic, and ethical content of the Howard's original Conan yarns.*

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# IN DEFENSE OF CONAN THE BARBARIAN

THE ANARCHISM, PRIMITIVISM, & FEMINISM OF  
ROBERT ERVIN HOWARD



*a new addition to Hyborian Scholarship by:*

**ROWAN WALKINGWOLF**

*"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."*

*"Is it not better to die honorably than to live in infamy? Is death worse than oppression, slavery, and ultimate destruction?"*

skeptical questions posed by José Villarrubia's in the beginning of this essay:

*"I have often wondered..."What is the appeal of Conan the Barbarian?" How does such a primary character from such humble origins- one without the depth and subtleties of most memorable characters from world literature, from Don Quixote to Blanche DuBois- manage to survive and thrive after several decades...? ...Why do we still care for a character that epitomizes testosterone-fueled escapist fantasies? A character that is violent, fairly unsophisticated, and narrow in scope?"*

The appeal of Conan the Barbarian, in my opinion, is just those qualities that Villarrubia denies Conan: his depth, his subtleties, his sophistication, and his broad scope. Conan mocks civilization, seeks consent in his relationships, respects women, and detests authority, yet he lives in a world of authoritarian, patriarchal, abusive civilization.

How is this a lack of depth, sophistication, or scope? Conan is a character completely opposed to the dominant cultural paradigm of his world, just as Howard himself was. And only by possessing a complex, rational, and critical analysis of the Hyborian World (modern industrial civilization, patriarchy) can Conan (Howard) hold such views. This is obviously the mark of depth, sophistication, and scope.

*This* is the appeal of Conan the Barbarian. Deep, critical analysis emblazoned upon a bad-ass, low-fantasy world of sword-and-sorcery.

Conan the Barbarian. Conan the Cimmerian. Conan, King of Aquilonia. Call him what you will, most everyone in contemporary Western society is familiar with this pulp icon to some extent. Sadly, when most people think of Conan the Barbarian, they instantly conjure up the loinclothed image of Arnold Schwarzenegger, all manner of indecipherable, polysyllabic grunting issuing forth from his grinning maw. The Conan movies of the 80s did a great deal to tarnish the character so masterfully created by Robert Ervin Howard in the 30s; worse, they all but abolished the intellectual, ethical, and political content of the original Conan stories in the minds of the public at large.

As with so many past literary creations of great genius, Hollywood ruined Conan the Barbarian.

One need not look far to find this attitude of Conan-as-Moron. Let us look to José Villarrubia's editorial in Volume 7 of Dark Horse's ongoing Conan comic series for just such an example:

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Speaking from my heart as a long time nerd, avid gamer and roleplayer, arm-chair intellectual, and- of course- as an anarcho-primitivist, this is tragic. Despite the popular insistence to the contrary, Howard's cornucopia of original Conan stories is replete with social, economic, political, and ethical intimations, conjectures, and outright expositions.

I appreciate Mr. Villarrubia's contributions to Dark Horse's mindblowingly awesome Conan comics, but I can't help but think he's never read the original Howard stories. If he had, he would surely know that Conan is far from "unsophisticated, and narrow in scope", that Howard's legendary savage absolutely has "depths and subtleties", though they are understandably difficult for civilized people to perceive. Perhaps this is why Villarrubia's opinion is shared by so many.

Why this conception of Conan is prevalent is not important; dispelling and dismantling it, is.

It is the purpose of this zine to reveal and elaborate on Robert E. Howard's underlying anarchism and primitivism, and his latent feminism. I seek to accomplish this by visiting with several of Howard's characters, most notably: Conan the Cimmerian as he appears in the original tales, Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, Bêlit the Pirate Queen of the Black Coast, Olivia of Ophir, and the character Agnes de Chastillon from Howard's story *Sword Woman*.

Hopefully, by illuminating Howard's most famous characters (and some of his most important, less famous ones), this essay will encourage a better understanding of the true Conan, and the genius and deep analysis of the man behind the myth.

## ANARCHISM

### What Is Meant By Anarchism In This Essay

In order to detail Howard's anarchism by examining his most famous barbarian, we must first understand what is meant by "anarchism". There are thousands of excellent sources describing anarchism, including books, essays, interwebs pages and articles, and even movies. Therefore, the description of

As the tale opens, Agnes's father- a vicious patriarch who physically and emotionally abuses Agnes- has promised her hand in marriage to a man she does not love. On her wedding day, her sister finds Agnes, and, upon seeing her great suffering and torment, counsils her to commit suicide rather than suffer a "woman's life". She slips Agnes a dagger, that she might be able to achieve this submissive task.

Instead, as Agnes grips the hilt, she feel utterly empowered, as is she's shaking hands with an old friend. When her abusive father and the intended bridegroom come to force her into the ceremony, she leaps at her would-be rapist and stabs him in the heart. She then flees, goes on a series of adventures, etc.

The tale of Dark Agnes, the Sword Woman, would most likely be seen by modern feminists as an affirmation of patriarchal values. That is, Agnes adopts the role of violent patriarchy- learning the trade of mercenary and sellsword, then working for various nobles, monarchs, nation-states, etc.- rather than suffer the abuses of menfolk. However, given Howard's time and place, and granted that Agnes had little to no chance of non-violently dissuading her arranged husband/would-be rapist, her actions and attitudes are liberatory. As a character, she is also obviously indicative of Howard's feminist leanings.

## CONCLUSIONS

It should be clear to the reader at this point that Howard's Conan tales abound with politics and social critique. Indeed, it should also be clear that Howard used these stories (and Conan, as a character) as a platform for advancing his political beliefs, namely: Anarchism, Feminism, and especially Anti-Civilization/Primitivism. With this knowledge in mind, I feel I can adequately answer the

The pair of comrades find their way onto the pirate galley, and subsequently convince the crew that Conan, having slain their previous leader, is their rightful captain. He allows the pirates aboard, and sets them to their tasks. As they rush to their work, the story concludes with the following conversation between Conan and Olivia:

*"And what of me, sir?" she asked. "What would you?" he countered... "To go with you, wherever your path may lie!" "To sail a road of blood and slaughter?... This keel will stain the blue waves crimson wherever it plows." "Aye, to sail with you on blue seas or red... You are a barbarian, and I am an outcast, denied by my people. We are both pariahs, wanderers of the earth. Oh, take me with you!"*

*With a gusty laugh he lifted her to his fierce lips. "... Cast off there, dogs! We'll scorch King Yildiz's pantaloons yet, by Crom!"*

Olivia asks what next? And Conan, with his characteristic respect for women, asks Olivia what she herself desires. Then we see Olivia, now fully confident and self-assured, embrace and adopt the life of the pirate. Finally, Howard masterfully ends this chapter in Conan's life with a promise to harass and plunder the King of Turan himself. Thus, the tale of a woman's journey into strength and self-confidence with an anti-authoritarian statement of purpose.

We find such a glorious interweaving of feminism and anti-authoritarian/anarchist sentiment one of Howard's most spectacular and memorable non-Conan stories, entitled *Sword Woman*. This yarn is set in 10<sup>th</sup> century France, and concerns Agnes de Chastillon, a woman from a bourgeois family of former nobility.

anarchism provided below is topical and is meant to be encompassing:

**Anarchism (n.):** The philosophy and/or socio-political system of organization without leaders. From the Greek *an-*, meaning without, and *archos*, meaning leaders.

This is anarchism at its core, without labels, without strictly defined schools of thought. Within the context of this essay, anarchism is the idea of people organizing and governing themselves and their social units without hierarchical leadership. This can be extended into a more modern interpretation of anarchism, which is the idea of organizing society without *any* hierarchy based on sex/gender, race, class, ethnic background, sexual orientation, etc. Anarchism is also frequently used to be synonymous with "anti-authoritarianism" and- outside the United States- "libertarianism".

Just so we're clear at this point: *anarchism does not mean chaos, nihilism, or violence for the sake of violence!* Despite what the opponents of anarchism might say, anarchists do not struggle for any of these ideals (well, okay, maybe chaos). No, indeed, these ideals belong to the dominant culture and to its adherents themselves!

Now that we have a loose, general description of what anarchist philosophy teaches, let us delve into Howard's perspective on the matter by examining his immortal Cimmerian.

### **Robert E. Howard, Conan, & Anarchism**

Conan is a solid pillar of anti-authoritarianism and anarchism. This fact is made evident by Conan's very beginnings.

Conan's origins lie in the darkly-wooded, somber hills of Cimmeria, a craggy land inspired by one of Howard's treks to the hill country of his own native Texas. In the darksome hills of his birth, we find Conan's people, the Cimmerians, the brood of the Grim Grey God, Crom. Howard's Cimmerians are modeled after the iron-age Celts, themselves a hardy people birthed of a somber and unforgiving land.

As Conan travels far from his homeland, he frequently makes comparisons between his people and the society and customs of his youth and the civilized societies, peoples, and customs of his later careers. Through these comparisons we learn that Cimmeria is a land of clans, which are essentially autonomous, leaderless, egalitarian bands of kinfolk who share resources, labor, and hardship alike. There is little hunger in Cimmeria (unless all mouths go unfed), no rape to speak of, relatively equal division of labor between the biological sexes, and an attitude of mutual aid and mutual defense.

We shall visit examples of Cimmeria's nature in the chapter concerning Primitivism. Suffice to say for now, anti-authoritarian sentiment and egalitarian lifeways are integral to Conan's being- he comes from a people who value freedom, autonomy, equality, and community.

We see these foundations and principles brought to light as soon as Conan leaves his homeland. Inspired by his grandfather's tales of travel and adventure, Conan sets off to find adventure of his own, shortly to find himself in Zamora, an eastern nation of spider-haunted towers, deadly assassins, and myriad thieves. While in Arenjun, the fabled Zamorian city of thieves, Conan himself learns the ins and outs of skullduggery from the denizens of The Maul, Arenjun's un-policed hive of scum and villainy.

She further contemplates this association between civilization and patriarchal violence and abuse the following day:

*"[She had] a revulsion toward her own kind. Her father, and Shah Amurath, they were civilized men. And from them she had had only suffering. She had never encountered any civilized men who treated her with kindness unless there was an ulterior motive behind his actions. Conan had shielded her, protected her, and- so far- demanded nothing in return."*

These two paragraphs serve to highlight the intricate bond between civilization and patriarchy. The connection between these two forces of destruction, violence, and abuse is an integral part of anarcho-primitivist thinking.

Olivia relies heavily on Conan's strength and ability for protection early in *Iron Shadows*. However, half way through the tale, Conan is captured by the pirates of the Red Brotherhood whose captain he has just slain. Loyal to her comrade and ally, Olivia knows she must sneak into the pirate encampment to free Conan. With unparalleled stealth, Olivia sneaks among the drunken and sleeping mob, and cuts Conan's bonds. Here, as in *Queen of the Black Coast*, we witness a helpless Conan being saved by a woman's strength.

After she severs the ropes binding him, Olivia says to Conan:

*"I am not afraid – now [that I have freed you]."*

And Conan offers an encouraging retort:

*"You were not afraid when you came to free me, either."*

her to a chieftain of the nomadic *zuagir* Shemites when she refused an arranged marriage to a prince of Koth. This chieftain gifted Olivia, as a slave, to the Shah Amurath in exchange for trade privileges.

She continues her tale, telling Conan of the unspeakable abuses she suffered at the hands of the cruel Hyrkanian, Amurath.

As they travel together, Olivia's former fears regarding Conan as a bloodthirsty savage and as a patriarch soften and begin to dissolve. Helping her to scale a treacherous cliff, Conan lends Olivia a hand. Howard writes:

*"She no longer found his touch repugnant."*

Olivia is a survivor of numerous traumas, including sexual abuse, and is understandably easily triggered by the touch of men. However, as Conan proves himself an ally and a friend, as well as a man who respects women as individuals and people, Olivia begins to grow comfortable with his touch, at least when it comes in the form of a helping hand.

The two companions trek onward, and as they bed down one evening, Olivia mulls over her past experiences of abuse, and her present experiences with Conan:

*"From her bed of leaves she watched the immobile figure, indistinct in the soft darkness. How strange, to move in fellowship with a barbarian, to be cared for and protected by one of a race, tales of which frightened her as a child! He came of a people bloody, grim, and ferocious. His kinship to the wild was apparent in his every action; it burned in his smouldering eyes. Yet he had not harmed her, and her worst oppressor had been a man of the world called civilized."*

Some time later, Conan travels to Nemediia, one of the foremost empires of the age. In the Nemedian city of Numalia, while plying his thieving skills on an opulent, unbelievably rich patrician, Conan gets caught in the act. Confronted by the city watch and a high Inquisitor, we see the anarchism and anti-authoritarianism of Robert E. Howard through the words of Conan the Thief. The entire scene is also a poignant display of Howard's attitude toward cops and other authoritarian enforcers of civilized slavery.

When Conan resists police interrogation, Dionus, the prefect of Numalian police says to him:

*"Oh, an insolent fellow!... An independent cur! One of these citizens with rights, eh? I'll soon knock [a confession] out of him!"*

Then, when Dionus is hushed by the Inquisitor, he protests:

*"Why go through all this trouble of questions and speculations?... It's much easier to beat a confession out of a suspect. Here's our man, no doubt about it. Let's take him to the Court of Justice – I'll get a statement out of him if I have to smash his bones to pulp."*

When another of the guards is introduced a short time later, Howard reveals more of his attitude toward authority figures:

*"You're Posthumo... You gouged out a girl's eye in the Court of Justice because she wouldn't give you information incriminating her lover,"*

Conan replies to this harassment in typical fashion:

*"Save your bullying for the fools who fear you.. I'm no city-bred Nemedian to cringe before your hired dogs. I've killed better men than you for less than this."*

Then:

*"Back, if you value your dog-lives!... Because you dare torture shopkeepers and strip and beat harlots to make them talk, don't think you can lay your fat paws on a hillman! I'll take some of you to hell with me!"*

Here we see a total and not impotent dismissal of authority figures and of authority itself. Conan clearly has no love of or fear for the violent brutes who enforce civilized laws and oppress the poor and downtrodden.

Howard repeats this theme throughout Conan's travels, notably in a scene that occurs early in *Queen of the Black Coast*. Having rushed toward a departing ship, and having leapt onto its deck, Conan is confronted by the ship's master, Tito the Merchant, who inquires just what the hell he thinks he's doing. Conan explains:

*"Well, last night in a tavern, a captain of the king's guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and a judge asked me where he had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wrath, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position."*

telling or politically-significant that Livia happens to be a weak woman.

Furthermore, I realized Howard's reasoning for using Livia as a character. Conan justifies this when he explains Livia's civilized origins and upbringing. It is not because she is a woman that Livia is a weak person, but because she is born and bred of the civilized world.

Neither of these points is particularly necessary to calcify the passages and arguments presented above. I have included them mostly in the interest of defending Howard's usage Livia (i.e.: a weaker woman character) as a plot device. Anyway, let's move on.

The final Conan story relevant to the current topic is *Iron Shadows in the Moon*, which, viewed in the right light, is an inspiring tale of a woman's journey from weakness and incapability to courage, self-confidence, and emotional and physical strength.

In *Iron Shadows*, we see from the onset the confrontation and annihilation of patriarchal values and behaviors. In the beginning of this tale, Conan exacts a terrible and brutal vengeance upon the Shah Amurath, a political tyrant who has slain Conan's band of outlaw *kozaki*. When he finally regains his composure following the slaughter, Conan becomes aware of a woman who was present to witness the scene. They decide to travel together to escape the Shah's remaining forces, though the woman, who is terrified of the blood-splattered barbarian, is reluctant.

We learn through their shared dialogue that this woman is Olivia, a former princess of Koth. Olivia's father, the King of Koth, sold

bargain she proposed and rape her. Conan catches her up some time later, saves her from some eldritch weirdness, and they converse at the end of the story. Conan explains to her that his intentions were purely honorable, that he saved her simply because she was an individual in need and in bondage, that he has no desire to hold her to her proposal:

*"It was a foul bargain I made. I do not regret [killing] Bajujh, but you are no wench to be bought and sold. The ways of men vary in different lands, but a man need not be a swine, wherever he is. After I thought awhile, I saw that to hold you to your bargain would be the same as if I had forced you. Besides, you are not tough enough for this land. You are a child of cities and books and civilized ways – which isn't your fault, but you'd die quickly following the life I thrive on. A dead woman would be no good to me. I will take you to the Stygian borders. The Stygians will send you home to Ophir." *emphasis added**

Howard states clearly that men should not be swine (read: violent patriarchs). He also repudiates sexual coercion and psychological/emotional abuse, by having Conan wax poetic on the topic of making sexual bargains in exchange for his services. These ideals help to form the fabric of contemporary feminism.

It occurred to me while thinking about this story that some dissenters will argue against the feminism in the story because Livia is a profoundly weak and incapable female character. On thinking about it, I realized several fallacies in this train of thought. First, interspersed throughout Howard's stories are a smattering of weak characters- men and women, people of all classes and economic backgrounds, etc. The same is true of strong, heroic characters. Because Howard's weak and strong characters alike come from a diverse set of backgrounds, it is in no way

*But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge's skull; then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable's stallion tied near by, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts."*

*"Well," said Tito hardily, "the courts have fleeced me too often in suits with rich merchants for me to owe them any love..."*

This is such a beautiful passage. Howard reveals the oppressiveness and tyranny of courts, and takes a subtle swipe at laws that make the killing of cops more severe than the killing of others. He also uses the barbarian's ignorance of civilized ways- for Conan is new to civilization at this point- to illustrate the ridiculous fallacy of such nationalistic and patriotic notions as "duty to the state" and "loyalty to society". Better yet, Howard shows us a side of Conan's personality that is oft ignored: he attempts to reason and communicate his way out of this situation, NON-VIOLENTLY! Only when Conan realizes (like all anarchists and anti-civ dissidents must) that the judge, guards, and civilized people are all *totally insane*, he then uses violence to escape their injustice.

In order to see how Conan's attitudes toward law, order, and criminal justice mirror Robert Howard's own ideas about law-enforcement and authority, let us look at a letter he wrote to author H.P. Lovecraft in August of 1932:

*"I note that some indignation is being expressed over the country in regard to the detestable police practice of grilling prisoners. It's about time. I think police harshness is mainly because the people have become too cowed by the heel of the law, that they do not resent or resist any kind of atrocity inflicted on them by men wearing tin badges."*

Then, when Lovecraft responded negatively, Howard sent him another missive in October of the same year:

*"If people seem bitter against the enforcers of the law, it is but necessary to remember that perhaps they have some slight reason. When I resent things as I've mentioned, I don't consider myself a criminal. It isn't law enforcement I resent, but the vandals that parade under the cloak of law. Condoning everything a man does, simply because he happens to wear brass buttons, is something I have no patience for."*

In these correspondences, we learn that Howard despises law-enforcers, and the corruption that power and hierarchy bring. He does not despise or speak against an orderly society, or the making of and enforcing of laws by The People in their communities. Howard envisions functional, healthy communities in which the members of those groups make and enforce their laws collectively, without the coercion and violence and oppression inherent in policing. These ideas are integral to anarchist philosophy.

It is not only police and the enforcers of law that Howard expresses hatred for, but also for those who make laws, and others who benefit from the power of stratified societies. In *Rogues in the House*- by far one of the most politically-driven Conan yarns- we witness Conan dismissing and invalidating monarchy, priesthood, and organized religion as a whole.

*"How can you stand there like a dumb brute?... Are you but a beast like these others? Ah, Mitra, once I thought there was honor in men. Now I know each has his price. You – what do you know of honor – or of mercy and decency? You are a barbarian like these others... I will give you a price!... Am I not fair?... Am I not a worthy reward for blood-letting? Is not a fair-skinned virgin a price worth slaying for?"*

*Kill... Bahjujh. Let me see his cursed head roll in the bloody dust! Kill him! Kill him!... Then take me and do as you wish with me. I will be your slave."...*

*"You said I was a barbarian... and that is true, Crom be thanked. If you had had men of the outlands guarding you instead of soft-gutted civilized weaklings, you would not be a slave... this night. I am Conan, a Cimmerian, and I live by the sword's edge... and though your kind call me a robber, I never forced a woman against her consent." *emphasis added**

Here, Howard is telling us that objectifying women as sexual commodities to be traded and bargained for is completely unethical and unacceptable. He also tells us that Conan, a male barbarian warrior, finds the idea of rape and unconsensual sexual activity to be repellant. Conan the symbol of masculine strength desires healthy relationships with women; Conan the symbol of masculine strength values Consent!

Eventually, Conan acquiesces to Livia's wishes and engineers a plot to rescue her. A bloodbath ensues, excessively gorey and violent even for ol' Two-gun Bob (as H.P. Lovecraft called Howard). After Conan slays Bahjujh and his tribesfolk, Livia flees in terror from Conan, thinking that he intends to capitalize on the

Again, Bêlit's specter expresses her great love for Conan. Bolstered and emboldened by the deep emotional bond he shares with his departed lover, Conan finds the strength to push forward and defeat his enemy.

So, ultimately, the strong male-bodied warrior, survivor of countless battles and violent conflicts, is powerless and defeated until he is strengthened, enriched, and saved by the magical power of a woman's love. Bêlit's Love triumphs, even in death. The strength of a woman's emotions toward her lover and life-companion are stronger than the man himself. This is undeniably a tacit statement of feminist values.

After Conan and Bêlit's interactions, we see ever more tangible and straightforward manifestations of Howard's feminism in *The Vale of Lost Women*. For the record, before expounding on the feminism in this story, I want to point out that it is by far one of the most racist of Howard's works. I in no way intend to deny or defend the racism that pervades Howard's works. His racism is detestable and inexcusable, but it is not the subject of this essay. That said, let's review the plot of *The Vale of Lost Women*.

Conan has come to a village of the Bakalah tribe, whose chief is called Bahjujh. Conan himself comes forward as the chieftain of the Bamulas, and comes to the village in order to negotiate a peace between the two rival peoples. Bahjujh has enslaved a young Ophirian woman named Livia, whom he intends to force to be his bride and his sexual slave. Upon seeing Conan enter the village, Livia beckons to Conan, pleading with him to free her. In so doing, she promises Conan whatever he wants. In Conan's response the reader finds the first solid example of feminism in this story:

While in a small city-state between Corinthia and Zamora, Conan is imprisoned for the just and well-deserved murder of the priest of Anu, a priest who had Conan's Gunderman ally hanged. While imprisoned, Conan is visited by the city's prince, Murilo. The prince seeks the death of his father's (the king's) advisor, the Red Priest Nabonidus, who actually rules the city. When Murilo approaches Conan and offers him release in exchange for the murder of Nabonidus, Howard writes:

*"The Cimmerian showed no sign of surprise or perturbation. He had none of the fear or reverence for authority that civilization instills in men. King or beggar, it was all one to him."*

Here again we see Howard/Conan's dismissal of the idea of authority. More importantly, we also see a complete egalitarian leveling of Hyborian society in one compact sentence: "King or beggar, it was all one to him." In addition to once again shirking authoritarianism, Howard proclaims in his eloquently simple way that all human beings are on equal footing, that social hierarchies are utter nonsense, that no person has the right to hold a position of power over any other.

Howard expands upon this when Murilo, accompanied by Conan, later confronts Nabonidus. Murilo says:

*"You exploit a whole kingdom for your personal greed, and under the guise of disinterested statesmanship, you swindle the king, beggar the rich, oppress the poor, and sacrifice the whole future of a nation for your ruthless ambition. You are no more than a fat hog with his snout in the trough. You are a greater thief than I. [Conan] is the most honest man of the three of us, because he steals and murders openly."*

This diatribe is particularly telling, because herein we see one member of the social elite- a Prince- railing against and vilifying another- a Priest. This is a polemic statement against not only monarchies and other hierarchical forms of leadership, but also against organized religion and priesthood. Howard lays it out clearly: he's against the rich and powerful and the social divisions that create them, and he's also completely opposed to the specialized caste of mind-control agents who maintain the oppression of the less privileged members of society.

As the story progresses, we learn that Thak, Nabonidus's man-ape pet gone berserk, has taken control of the priest's deathtrap of a house. With mutual interest in self-preservation and survival in mind, Murilo offers Nabonidus a bargain to spare his life and ally with him politically if Nabonidus will help Murilo and Conan escape the house alive. Nabonidus agrees, at which time Conan snarkily remarks:

*"When did a priest keep an oath?"*

Yet again, in his sleekly terse way, Howard manages to undermine and discount organized religion and priests in a single sentence. These dismissals of organized thought control and hierarchic leadership are also integral elements of contemporary anarchist thought.

In *Beyond the Black River*, arguably one of Howard's most masterful Conan tales, Conan befriends an Aquilonian forest-runner and frontiersman named Balthus. Early in the story, Balthus is totally loyal to Aquilonia, the most powerful empire of the Hyborian Age, and his heart and mind are fully devoted to the idea and practice of colonization and conquest of the Picts. Throughout the

him into the clutches of Bêlit, a Shemitish female pirate whose exploits of conquest and pillage haunt Hyborian sailors. When Bêlit sets upon Conan and his crew of sailors, she and her corsairs slay all but Conan, and Bêlit offers him the chance to join her crew. He, of course, obliges, and they make a mighty effort of plundering the crap out of the western coasts of Kush, Shem, and Stygia. Eventually, Conan and Bêlit begin to love one another deeply, and as their adventures progress, so to does their relationship. Bêlit is one of Howard's strongest, most intelligent, most tactically gifted female characters, and inspecting her attitudes and actions reveals Howard's own attitudes concerning women.

As a pirate-queen, reaver, and warrior woman, Bêlit walks the path of constant danger, constant exposure to the threat of injury and death. As such, she is utterly fearless. Two examples:

*"I was never afraid. I have looked into the naked fangs of Death too often. Conan, do you fear the gods?"*

*"We fear nothing: Conan, let us go and sack that city!"*

Bêlit's fearlessness is not her only strong trait, nor the only expression of Howard's feminism in *Queen of the Black Coast*. Bêlit says at some point in the story that not even death can separate her and Conan, that death is powerless to destroy the superbly powerful love she feels for him. Soon thereafter, at the hands of some characteristic Howardian demon-beastie-thing, Bêlit meets her end as Conan loots and pillages. Upon returning to find her dead, Conan is then attacked by the same ghastly Things that killed his beloved Bêlit. Conan is actually defeated by said demon thing, and just as he is about to perish, the ghost of Bêlit appears.

historical fiction, there is little niche for bold, brave women except the path of the reaver. As I said, take it with a grain of salt.

In his personal correspondences with friends and fellow authors, Howard expressed his respect and admiration for women, and defended the accomplishments and capabilities of women to those who demeaned them. He also used his fiction as a podium for presenting his feminist ideals, and it is the purpose of this chapter to furnish examples of Howard's feminist fiction. I intend to accomplish this by looking at the following characters: Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, fellow female pirate Bêlit, Olivia of Ophir, and Dark Agnes de Chastillon- the Sword Woman. We shall also examine Conan's interactions with the character Livia in the story *The Vale of Lost Women*.

To begin revealing Howard's feminism, let's look at a poignant line from the Conan tale *The People of the Black Circle*. In describing the magically-induced, trance-like hallucination that the Devi Yasmina- a strong, intelligent, respectable female character in her own right- experiences at the hands of a cruel male wizard, Howard writes:

*"She suffered all the woes and wrongs and brutalities that man has inflicted on woman throughout the eons."*

In the context of the story, this line- this woman's experience- is presented as a very undesirable, negative, horrible perspective. In other words, Howard writes this line in commiseration with Yasmina, indeed, in commiseration with women's oppression and suffering, and as an ally to their suffrage.

In the story *Queen of the Black Coast*, Conan's adventures bring

story, Conan shares stories and life lessons with Balthus, helping him to gain perspective and wisdom, and slowly turning him away from his statist, racist, colonialist, and civilized leanings. As the story progresses, Howard uses the dialogue between the heroic barbarian and Balthus the woodsman to reveal more of his own political ideals.

When discussing the current political situation early in the tale, Conan chides Balthus:

*"This colonization business is mad, anyway... If the Aquilonians would cut up some of the big estates of their barons... they wouldn't have to cross the border and take the land of the Picts away from them."*

In a mere two sentences, Howard decries colonialism and colonization, and he also reveals to the reader his opinions regarding class struggle and economic inequality. If only the Aquilonians would voluntarily restructure their classist, elitist society, and redistribute their wealth, colonization (i.e.: the violent conquest of land and resources) would be unnecessary!!!

Obviously, since the Picts of Hyboria are partially based on Native American peoples, Howard is also expressing here a commiseration with the plight of the indigenous here in North America and abroad, an opinion he also put forth in multiple correspondences with others.

After chiding Balthus and the Aquilonian Empire for their colonizing efforts, Conan goes on to tell Balthus of Venarium. Venarium was Aquilonia's single attempt to colonize Cimmeria, the hill country of Conan's birth. As a teenager, Conan helped to rally the people of Cimmeria against the Aquilonians, an effort

that ultimately culminated in the Siege of Venarium. The Aquilonian fort was sacked, pillaged, and utterly razed in a swarm of savage fury. The Cimmerian argues that such is the fate of all civilizations and their colonies, all the while deriding the privileged and powerful who lead such efforts:

*"Soft-bellied fools sitting on velvet cushions with naked girls offering them iced wine on their knees – I know the breed. They can't see any farther than their palace wall. Diplomacy – hell! They'd fight Picts with theories of territorial expansion. Valannus [an Aquilonian commander] and men like him have to obey the orders of a set of damned fools. They'll never grab any more Pictish land, any more than they'll ever rebuild Venarium. The time may come when they'll see the barbarians swarming over the walls of Eastern cities!"*

Howard expands on anti-imperialist themes in one of Conan's later adventures, *Red Nails*. Toward the beginning of the tale, Conan and Valeria of the Red Brotherhood- an amazingly deft pirate woman- are trapped atop a small plateau, while a dinosaur-dragon beast harangues them from below. Reaching down to the trees whose branches barely reach the summit, Conan collects a number of smaller branches, places a short sword in their midst as a stabbing implement, and begins lashing them together with vines to fashion a makeshift spear. On hearing her express her confusion, Conan explains to Valeria:

*"...There's strength in union. That's what the Aquilonian renegades used to tell us Cimmerians when they came into the hills to raise an army to invade their own country."*

So, to enter into a discussion of Robert Howard and feminism in his works, we must first establish a working description of what Feminism is.

**Feminism (n.):** The liberatory critique of Patriarchy, and all of the harmful sexist trappings and conventions that derive from it and support its continuation.

**Patriarchy** is a word most folks have never heard. In essence, it means the physical and psychological/emotional domination of women by men. It also means rigidly-enforced binary gender roles, clearly established ideals of masculinity and femininity, unique codes of behavior for men and women, rigid sexual norms and homophobia, hatred of transfolks (i.e.: transphobia) and of men and women who don't obey gender roles, violence toward anyone who deviates from patriarchal norms, and on and on.

Thus, in the following section, I will attempt to innumerate examples in Howard's work of Feminist- thus, Anti-Patriarchal- ideals and actions.

### **Feminism & Anti-Patriarchy in the Works of R.E.H.**

First, a disclaimer, then onto the examples. For folks who don't know: Robert E. Howard was alive and producing his literary works in the 1920s and 30s. Thus, when I discuss Feminism in the following examples, the reader must remember to take these passages in their proper context. Certainly, bell hooks would shudder and cringe at the violence and dominant concept of masculinity that Howard's strong female characters embody. However, given the extreme patriarchy of Hyboria, and the extreme historical patriarchy of the real-world of Howard's

swindlers, con-men, drunkards, working men and women, prostitutes, town bosses, corporate thugs, and other figures endemic to his small Texas boom-town. He further added that witnessing the abuses, cons, and violence of these real-world characters sparked his critique of industrial civilization. We can see from the previous examples how Howard's critique and understanding of civilization grew stronger and more diverse with the writing of his Conan stories.

Finally, as if the above information were not enough to shed light on Howard's primitivism, I'd like to visit an oft-quoted passage from *Beyond the Black River*:

*"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind... Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."*

That pretty much says it all, doesn't it?

## FEMINISM, ANTI-PATRIARCHY CRITIQUE

### What Is Meant By Feminism In This Essay

As with anarchism and primitivism, Howard also showcased feminist leanings and ideals in his Conan works, and in other stories. This is shocking to most people, especially because of the worldwide influence of the Schwarzenegger films of the 80s. As I said earlier, it is due to these films that Conan is commonly thought of as a meat-headed simpleton, for all intents and purposes a jock with a broadsword. The Conan of the films embodies sexism, the dominant culture's concept of masculinity, and patriarchy. This is a grandiose tragedy, considering that Howard himself professed feminist ideals and used his writing, if only subtly, to advance feminism.

The first few words of this bold statement invoke the workers' ballads of the IWW and other unions- "There is power in a union!"- and are quite clearly a Howardian doff of the cap to the workers' struggles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in America and abroad. By utilizing "Aquilonian renegades" as a facsimile for unionizers and labor organizers, Howard tells the reader again that he supports the working class. Also telling is his support for those who ally themselves with the indigenous, fighting empire from within.

Given the insight provided by *Beyond the Black River*, we see that Howard's philosophy of resistance is encompassing and multi-faceted: he supports indigenous resistance to imperialism, struggles for workers' rights and labor initiatives, and the resistance to empire and conquest from the empire's own subjects.

To summarize and tie together the ideas in this chapter, let us peruse one of Conan's more memorable and powerful lines from *Hour of the Dragon*:

*"Is it not better to die honorably than to live in infamy? Is death worse than oppression, slavery, and ultimate destruction?"*

It's difficult to imagine a more inspiring anarchic slogan than this gem.

## PRIMITIVISM, ANTI-CIVILIZATION

### What Is Meant By Primitivism In This Essay

Primitivism is ultimately a critique of civilization, and of the lifeways, economics, politics, attitudes, and behaviors that derive from it and support it. Therefore, in order to understand

primitivism, we must likewise have an understanding of "civilization". Within the context of this work, civilization can be understood as follows:

**Civilization (n.):** A social structure and lifeway characterized by cities/urban settlements, ecocidal landbase destruction, and the reliance on year-round, intensive agriculture to produce one or a few crops that support constant growth and extreme specialization among the populace. Here, agriculture means a way of growing a small number of crops in intensely destructive ways, depleting nitrogen in the soil and ultimately annihilating the complex and biodiverse relationships of plants, animals, microbes, fungi, etc., that are native to the affected landbase.

There are also a number of ideals and practices endemic to Civilization that primitivism opposes: slavery, genocide, organized and oppressive religion, large-scale trade and commerce, patriarchy, rigid gender roles and the oppression of women, and so on.

**Primitivism**, therefore, is the opposition to this idea of Civilization and all it entails and encompasses. It argues instead for a return to primitive or ancestral lifeways (e.g.: egalitarian, small scale communities, abolition of gender and gender roles, ecologically sustainable "primitive skills", etc.). Anarcho-primitivism is a specific theory and school of thought that incorporates the anti-civilized critique with the basic foundational premises of anarchism- non-hierarchical communities, consensus-based decision making, anti-authoritarianism and anti-statist politics, etc.

And later in that story, we learn of Conan's Herculean strength (and of the weakness and physical poverty of civilized peoples) when he confronts Baal-Pteor, the Strangler:

*"You fool!... Did you deem yourself strong, because you were able to twist the heads off civilized folk, poor weaklings with muscles like rotten string? Hell! Break the neck of a wild Cimmerian bull before you call yourself strong. I did that, before I was a full-grown man..."*

And we learn of Conan's inexhaustible patience when he and Valeria are ensnared by the dinosaur-dragon-thing in *Red Nails*:

*"Conan spoke imperturbably. He was a barbarian, and the terrible patience of the wilderness and its children was as much a part of him as his lusts and rages. He could endure a situation like this with a coolness impossible to a civilized person."*

Because Howard so frequently describes Conan's traits in order to contrast them with the attributes of civilized folk, we can infer his general attitude toward such people. To Howard, the civilized person is slow, dull-witted, cowed and beaten into submission, fearful of authority, weak, impatient and impetuous, poorly constituted, cowardly, completely out of touch with the wilderness, dishonorable, likely to betray others, disloyal... The list stretches on, but the point remains. Howard's descriptions of Conan give us a firm understanding that he loathed the civilized and civilization, and found civilized peoples and societies to be wholly inferior to "primitive" peoples and lifeways.

He expressed this attitude readily enough in some of his correspondences with others. For example, he describes how he found inspiration for his fictional characters in the motley array of

In this glorious dialogue, Howard once again confronts the reader with evidence of human relationships with non-human animals, and with the landbase at large. Better yet, Howard also deals a blow to civilized science and those who practice it, suggesting that they simply use their "rational" arts to justify that which they wish to believe in and to eradicate and eliminate all that which they don't. The critique of civilized pseudo-science and pseudo-reason is another vital cornerstone of primitivist thought.

Much of the remainder of Howard's primitivism via Conan manifests itself in the form of descriptions of the barbarian, and comparisons between him and his civilized foes. Let's visit a handful of these and discuss them afterward.

In *The Slithering Shadow*, Howard writes of Conan:

*"A barbarian of barbarians, the vitality and endurance of the wild were his, granting him survival where civilized men would have perished."*

In *Beyond the Black River*:

*"No civilized hand ever forged that head-piece [Conan's horned helm]. Nor was the face below it that of a civilized man: dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes, it was a face untamed as the primordial forest which formed its background."*

In *Shadows in Zamboula*, Howard tells us of Conan's reflexes and instincts:

*"He did not awake as civilized men do, drowsy and drugged and stupid. He awoke instantly, with a clear mind, recognizing the sound that had interrupted his sleep."*

### **Robert E. Howard, Conan, & Primitivism**

Robert Howard's Conan tales are fecund meadows of primitivist sentiment. The Primitivist arguments and discussions in these stories are amazingly abundant, far more so than the anarchist politics that we have just explored. Conan, like Howard, is unabashedly anti-civilized.

We can see this fact plainly enough in Conan's origins and in his title: he's a Barbarian, after all! He comes from a hunter-gatherer society in which there are few gender distinctions, and in which labor and resources are equally shared. His people are warlike, but only when they are invaded by their more warlike Imperial neighbors, the Aquilonians, or their agriculturalist northern neighbors, the Nordheimr.

Conan's hunter-gatherer foundations, and his association between agriculture and pastoralism and urban Civilization, surface in *Red Nails*. Conan and Valeria of the Red Brotherhood have come upon an ancient city, Xuchotl. Beholding the size and splendor of Xuchotl, Conan wonders aloud:

*"No cattle, no plowed fields... How do these people live?"*

Then later, after scrutinizing the other side of the city, he remarks:

*"No cattle have trampled the plain on this side of the city... No plowshare has touched the earth for years, maybe centuries. But look: once this plain was cultivated."*

In these passages, Howard demonstrates a solid primitivist base, in that he recognizes the relationship between- indeed the necessity of- agriculture and/or pastoralism to civilization. Without these

exploitative and destructive forms of food production, urban civilization would be untenable. Further, without these forms of exploitation and destruction, the other ideological and infrastructural bases that underlie civilization would be impossible.

Howard elaborates on these ideas in other Conan stories. In *The Slithering Shadow*, Conan points out how the dominator mindset of agriculture/pastoralism manifests itself in the economies and economic beliefs of civilized peoples:

*"In my country, no starving man is denied food, but you civilized people must have your recompense – if you are like all I ever met."*

Among the Cimmerian people (hunter-gatherers) food is shared; among civilized agriculturalists, pastoralists and capitalists, food costs money, and the poor go hungry. Classism and poverty = economic inequality = an exploitative, dominating base of food production. Howard hints at this point again with the following passage from *Pool of the Black One*:

*"Himself as cleanly elemental as a timber wolf, he was yet not ignorant of the perverse secrets of rotting civilizations."*

Conan is a wolf, a wild pack hunter and scavenger, who understands full-well the underpinnings of cities and the filth and madness they breed.

Howard further explores the dominator mentality and how it drives civilized societies and peoples in *Iron Shadows in the Moon*. In this story, a young woman named Olivia has fled her captor and enslaver, the cruel Shah Amurath. Olivia was sold by her

Valeria, Howard takes the opportunity to expound his idea of human as animal:

*"To the barbarian, no such gulf existed between himself... and the animals, as existed in the conception of Valeria la civilized Aquilonian. The monster below them, to Conan, was merely a form of life differing from himself mainly in physical shape. He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it. Feeling a kinship with all wild things, even dragons, it was impossible for him to experience the sick horror which assailed Valeria at the sight of the brute's ferocity."*

There can be no doubt after reading this passage that Howard believed in the wildness and animal-ness of humanity, and thus the kinship with humanity shared by all wild animals. Howard's notion- that humans are animals, and that the human animal fits into an ecological niche like all other animals- is critically important to primitivist philosophy.

I'd like to examine one final passage that relates to this topic and leads into another. In *Beyond the Black River*, Conan and his civilized companion Balthus are discussing rumors surrounding a powerful Pictish sorcerer called Zogar Sag. Conan says:

*"Civilized men laugh... but not one can tell me how Zogar Sag can call pythons and tigers and leopards out of the wilderness and make them do his bidding. They would say it is a lie, if they dared. That's the way with civilized men. When they can't explain something by their half-baked science, they refuse to believe it."*

*"They were wild men, of a sort, yet there was still a wide gulf between them and the Cimmerian. They were the sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism. He was a barbarian of a thousand generations of barbarians. They had acquired stealth and craft, but he had been born to these things. He excelled them even in lithe economy of motion. They were wolves, but he was a tiger."*

Howard's other references to Conan as animal are too numerous to reproduce here, most notably his constant and perpetual reference to Conan as a wolf.

To drive home the point that Howard truly believed in the human as an animal, and wasn't simply being creative in his similes and metaphors, one need only to read *Rogues in the House*. In this story, as mentioned previously, the Red Priest Nabonidus has kept a man-ape pet called Thak for many years. Thak has escaped, and has demonstrated his great intelligence, wisdom, and ability to deceive throughout the story. When he and Conan finally engage in their epic fight to the death, Conan prevails, but only just. Recalling the earlier themes of the story, and cementing his own barbaric philosophy in stone, Conan postulates:

*"I have slain a man tonight, not a beast."*

In this simple sentence, Howard ties together all his past references to human beings as wolves, tigers, panthers, and others into a coherent statement of values: the Human Being is an Animal, and animal life is equal to human life.

Howard delves further into this concept and truly concretizes it as a philosophical tenet in *Red Nails*. As Conan prepares himself to kill the dinosaur-dragon-thing that waits below to eat himself and

own father to a nomadic chieftain who then gifted her (still as an object and a slave) to the Shah Amurath to secure trade privileges. When discussing her plight as a captive slave and an object of civilized men's patriarchal tyranny, Olivia says to Conan:

*"Aye, civilized men sell their children as slaves to savages, sometimes. They call your race barbarian, Conan of Cimmeria."*

And Conan grows in return:

*"We do not sell our children..."*

Thus, Howard establishes slavery as a solid institution underlying and supporting civilization. To Conan, as a barbarian with a deeply-embedded and oft-expressed code of honor, and as an individual member of a roughly egalitarian community, slavery and other civilized constructs are utterly unfathomable. In *Queen of the Black Coast*, Conan says:

*"By Crom, though I've spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension."*

And later, in *The God in the Bowl*, when Conan is given ultimatums and commands by Dionus, Posthumo, and the Inquisitor's other police forces, Howard writes:

*"The Cimmerian hesitated. He was not afraid, but slightly bewildered, as a barbarian always is when confronted by the evidence of civilized networks and systems, the workings of which are so baffling and mysterious to him."*

It is simply impossible for Conan (read: Howard) to understand civilized methods and lifeways, because they are based on principles that are unthinkable, perverse, twisted, violent, and insane to the anti-civilized mind. Slavery, colonization (as we saw earlier), courts and judges, law-enforcement, the oppression and exploitation of those on the lower rungs of the hierarchy, and the oppression and abuse of women (as we shall visit in the coming chapter)- all these concepts and practices are awful and unacceptable to Conan and to Howard himself.

Howard was also fond of describing the great cruelty and malevolence of civilized peoples, traits that sit well with a way of life based upon continual conquest, destruction, violence, and abuse. *A Witch Shall Be Born* yields one of the more disturbing scenes in Conan's career, in which he is crucified by a hawk-faced general named Constantius. Later, after escaping his impending death and letting the drive for revenge fester within him, Conan returns and crucifies Constantius right back! As Constantius hangs on the cross, Conan lectures him:

*"You are more fit to inflict torture than to endure it... I hung there on a cross as you are hanging, and I lived, thanks to circumstances and a stamina peculiar to barbarians. But you civilized men are soft; your lives are not nailed to your spines as are ours. Your fortitude consists mainly in inflicting torment, not in enduring it."*

Howard further paints a picture of civilized cruelty in *Hour of the Dragon*, wherein Zelata, a witch and wisewoman, councils Conan:

*"I have found the brooding silence of the glens more pleasing than the babble of city streets... The children of the wild are kinder than the children of men."*

Zelata is one of Howard's most fascinating characters. The previous conversation takes place after she saves Conan from certain death. She does this by speaking directly with a wolf and a hawk in inhuman tongues, convincing them to intercede in the conflict that imperils Conan's life. Here is a woman of the wild, one who speaks with non-human animals, one who has a direct, tangible, healthy relationship with her landbase. Here is a woman who shirks the lives and ways of city-dwellers, who recognizes the glory of wild nature, and a woman who traffics in the arcane, energetic life-force magic belying the fabric of reality.

Zelata is an excellent example of Howard's tacit primitivism. Moreover, her ability to converse with non-human animals is but one example of a recurrent theme in Howard's works, namely his abolition of the civilized notion that humans are not animals, and that human life is better and more valuable than animal life. Let's review some examples.

In *Queen of the Black Coast*, Bêlit the Pirate Queen says to Conan:

*"You are no soft Hyborian! ...You are fierce and hard as a gray wolf. Those eyes were never dimmed by city lights; those thews never softened by life amid marble walls."*

In *Beyond the Black River*, Howard says:

*"He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization..."*

And later in *Beyond the Black River*, when comparing the half-wild, half-civilized forest-runners with Conan's natural barbarism, Howard tells us: