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## Love, Death and Money in Mashonaland: Olive Schreiner's Trooper Peter Halket

### Abstract

When wars are fought, anxiety about sexual behaviour never seems far away. Will men behave like men on the battlefield? Or will they misbehave like men, and commit atrocities against soldiers or civilians - and even, perhaps, against women? Such worries surfaced in the English periodical press during the Boer War in a sharp exchange between the journalist and campaigner, W.T. Stead,<sup>1</sup> and the writer Arthur Conan Doyle. In a piece entitled *Methods of Barbarism* (1901),<sup>2</sup> Stead charged British troops with the sexual abuse and rape of unprotected Boer women made vulnerable by the British policy of destroying Boer homesteads. This latter policy was at the heart of the British response to Boer guerrilla tactics following defeats during 1900. Boer farms were providing a support system which their destruction was intended to break, while simultaneously demoralizing Boer combatants.

CAROLYN BURDETT

## Love, Death and Money in Mashonaland: Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket*

When wars are fought, anxiety about sexual behaviour never seems far away. Will men behave like men on the battlefield? Or will they misbehave like men, and commit atrocities against soldiers or civilians – and even, perhaps, against women? Such worries surfaced in the English periodical press during the Boer War in a sharp exchange between the journalist and campaigner, W.T. Stead,<sup>1</sup> and the writer Arthur Conan Doyle. In a piece entitled *Methods of Barbarism* (1901),<sup>2</sup> Stead charged British troops with the sexual abuse and rape of unprotected Boer women made vulnerable by the British policy of destroying Boer homesteads. This latter policy was at the heart of the British response to Boer guerrilla tactics following defeats during 1900. Boer farms were providing a support system which their destruction was intended to break, while simultaneously demoralizing Boer combatants. Camps were set up to accommodate and control displaced refugees, but their poor sanitation, and the scanty diet, resulted in widespread and endemic disease, and the deaths of thousands of Afrikaner and African people, most of whom were women and children.<sup>3</sup> Doyle published his *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (1902) as a corrective to what he felt was inaccurate and injurious anti-English propaganda – criticism which had intensified as a result of the farm-burnings and camps. Stead's accusations in particular incensed Doyle, and became the occasion of his defence of English soldierly conduct and, ultimately, civilized English manhood.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I want briefly to report the central features of this propaganda clash before stepping back a few years in order to look more closely at a literary preface to the war, published in 1897, which again puts the sexual conduct of an English combatant at the centre of its tale. This is Olive Schreiner's allegory story, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, which she wrote to condemn the policy and tactics of Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company in occupying the land north of the Limpopo River which came to be called Rhodesia.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that while Stead and Doyle, despite their apparently opposed positions, both evoke common ideals of civilization and Englishness and deploy common stereotypes of Africa,

Schreiner's story takes very similar themes and pushes them in different, and subversive, ways. It does this through an explicit manipulation of the assumptions about race and gender taken for granted by Stead and Doyle.

Stead published *Methods of Barbarism* in July 1901. Although it is a wide-ranging indictment of Britain's failure properly to abide by the rules of military engagement established at the Hague Convention of 1899, it is the effects of farm-burning, and the pitiable plight of dispossessed Boer women and children, that form the moral heart of Stead's argument. The treatment of these vulnerable women is the primary sign and measure of an English civilization which, Stead concludes, is wanting. Back in England, not one responsible father of a family would allow his servant girl on a public common, in peace-time, in the company of soldiers:

Why, then, should they suppose that when the same men are released from all restraints of civilization, and sent forth to burn, destroy and loot at their own sweet will and pleasure, they will suddenly undergo so complete a transformation as scrupulously to respect the wives and daughters of the enemy ... I do not say a word against our soldiers. I only say that they are men.<sup>6</sup>

In 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', a much-discussed series of articles on prostitution published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* during the mid-1880s, Stead had conjured up a heady vision of the innocent daughters of the working classes ruined by debauched aristocrats, whose jaded sexual appetites were whetted by the prospect of young virginal flesh; here, by contrast, the atavistic effects of warfare unleash the naturally predatory sexual appetite of 'ordinary' (lower-class) males, no longer bound by the civilizing influence of England and its good wives and mothers.<sup>7</sup> Stead deftly welds together an image of manliness familiar through the adventure fiction of G.A. Henty, H. Rider Haggard and others, with the haunting fear of degeneration caused by too much of an encounter with the dissipating and primitive forces of warfare and Africa.

Doyle sets about countering Stead's accusations by defending the policy of farm-burning. The burnings were, he argues, a valid military response, and the concentration camps an equally necessary duty enjoined on a civilized people to keep safe non-combatants. The major threat to Boer women and children was not the proximity of armed conflict, but an unregulated black African population. Moreover, even if the Boer women's farms were saved, without their menfolk they were still imperilled: 'no woman on a lonely farm was safe amid a black population, even if she had the means of procuring food'.<sup>8</sup> In an earlier pamphlet, Stead had himself used the image of black men raping white women, arguing that the farm-burning policy exposed 'these unfortunate [Afrikaner] white women to the loathly horror of compulsory intercourse with the Kaffirs'.<sup>9</sup> Aware, perhaps, of how effective this focus on a rapacious and uncontrolled African sexuality had become for propaganda supporting the need for the camps, Stead abandoned this accusation in order directly to implicate British soldiers in sexual outrages.<sup>10</sup>

Doyle contends that there is absolutely no evidence to support Stead's calumny; and, in addition to redressing the charges against military tactics, he also sets to righting the image of imperial troops by presenting them as honourable in military (and, by implication, sexual) conduct. The 'devoted Tommy and his chivalrous officer', and 'the humanity and discipline of the British troops', are contrasted with the Boers' slide into depravity as the conflict extended into guerrilla war.<sup>11</sup>

Doyle draws on a familiar Victorian medievalism in order to make synonymous individual honour and national worth. Devotion and chivalry are the timeless qualities of an Englishman, and humanity and discipline the mark of such men's common national identity. The good conduct of imperial troops is thus a measure of the moral health and destiny of England. Stead, by contrast, pulls apart manliness and Englishness, drawing on widespread anxieties about degeneration, as well as the popularity of images of masculinity in imperial adventure fiction. He implicitly evokes the romanticized vision of a 'primitive' manliness extolled by writers such as Andrew Lang and Rider Haggard, and turns it into something potentially ignoble. In a world historically divorced from the chivalric past, propriety is a matter of modern codes of conduct; these codes are respected and valued by the good English audience to which Stead appeals, who are called upon to curb and check an uncontrolled masculinity by enforcing the standards of a properly civilized society. These modern standards, however, turn out to be very similar to Doyle's; they are, indeed, a romanticized medievalism updated and, in both men's work, it is the treatment of women which exemplifies the standard.

The nature of masculinity, and its relation to national identity, is central to the debate between Stead and Doyle. For both men, its representation depends on particular images of femininity, on the one hand; and, on the other, a series of references to black Africans who stand as the mark of a 'real' primitivism, or an outer limit of humanity, rendered as an uncivilized and rapine male sexuality. I want to contrast the ways in which both Doyle and Stead construct their respective positions in the propaganda war – through culturally potent images of masculinity, Englishness and civilization, which find their most extreme contrast not in the backward Boer, but the unregulated African – with the very different use to which Olive Schreiner puts similar images in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*.

Like Stead, with whom she had long been in friendly contact, Schreiner was deeply opposed to the war in South Africa and, like him, her writing appealed to, or attempted to call into being, a good tradition of English liberalism and commitment to justice. Like Stead too, Schreiner had identified, on her return from England to South Africa in 1889, one man in whose hands she felt the future of South Africa would be held; he was 'The only big man we have here', Cecil Rhodes.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Stead, though, Schreiner became quickly disillusioned with Rhodes, and was fiercely critical

of British Empire from at least the mid-1890s. When she and Rhodes finally met, about a year after her return to South Africa from Europe in 1889, Rhodes had the Cape premiership and Schreiner was already beginning to be wary of him. She was particularly condemning of his support in parliament for the Masters and Servants Act Amendment Bill – popularly called the Strop Bill – which allowed for the flogging of farm servants.<sup>13</sup> By 1895, Schreiner was driven publicly to declare her opposition to Rhodes. Together with the young farmer she had recently married, Samuel Cronwright, she wrote a paper entitled 'The Political Situation', which argued that the overtly retrogressive force in Cape politics – the main Afrikaner political group, the Afrikaner Bond – was in truth being manipulated by the real power in the Cape, the 'small band of Monopolists' which was working the colony's political and economic life for its own aggrandizing purposes.<sup>14</sup>

In witnessing Rhodes's Pioneer Column's scramble for the lands belonging to the Shona and Ndebele tribes – land identified with legends of gold – Schreiner saw all too clearly its miserable reality in the violent and wholesale expropriation of land and cattle from the African population.<sup>15</sup> After the Jameson Raid in 1896 (the bungled attempt to invade the Transvaal, carried out by Chartered Company forces and obviously sanctioned by Rhodes), she was even more certain that the real danger in South Africa was the monopolistic and expansionist capitalism associated with him. Aware though she was of the 'cardinal vice' of Boer racism (on 'the native question we have to fight the main body of them to the death', she wrote to the liberal Cape politician, John X. Merriman<sup>16</sup>), Schreiner was convinced that the divisive and immiserating force for the bulk of the African population was European, and especially English, capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

In 1896 the Shona and the Ndebele people rebelled against Chartered Company rule in their lands, prompted by their dispossession, and a life made even more precarious by the severe rinderpest epidemic of 1896. Schreiner wrote to a socialist friend: 'We are having a terrible time out here. You people in England don't know what the heel of a capitalist is when it gets right flat on *the neck of a people!* ... Now we are busy killing the poor Matabeles.'<sup>18</sup> Some four months later, she wrote to another friend: 'the other morning I woke, and as I opened my eyes there was an Allegory full fledged in my mind! A sort of allegory story about Matabeleland'.<sup>19</sup> Published the following year as *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, it tells of a young Englishman, Peter Halket, employed by the Chartered Company to put down the uprising in Matabeleland.

Separated from his troop while scouting, Peter has to spend a night alone on a small hill or 'kopje' and, in the vast loneliness of the African veld, a phantasmagoria of memory and guilt and desire plays itself out in his mind until he is interrupted by the appearance of a stranger who we as readers – but not yet Peter – recognize as Christ. Peter (also called Peter Simon) listens to the stranger's stories – about conflict between the Turks and Armenians,<sup>20</sup>

about greed and cruelty in South Africa, and about his company of men and women who throughout the ages oppose cruelty and oppression and aid the weak. The stories last throughout the night and they transform Peter. In the short second part of the book, Peter is returned to his troop. Much of this section is relayed through the conversation of his fellow troopers. We learn that Peter has been ordered to execute a captured African, as a punishment for pleading for the latter's release; instead, Peter is himself shot while covertly freeing the condemned man. The book was published with a frontispiece photograph showing three black men executed by hanging from a tree in Matabeleland, surrounded by their languid white executioners. This was juxtaposed by the dedication, 'To a great good man Sir George Grey, once Governor of the Cape Colony, who ... governed by an uncorruptible justice'. The book thus aimed to shock its English audience into recognizing the perversity and fallacy of the imperial ideal of English justice and benevolence.

The story works by prompting the reader to make connections which Peter himself resists. At the beginning of the story, as Peter sits on the lonely veld, he thinks of England and his good, poverty-stricken mother. His memories stir his ambition. In South Africa he, too, will make money as others have; he will speculate and accumulate, and money will bring power and influence, and his mother need never work again. In trying to figure out how it is that speculation operates, Peter's mind grows hazy, just as it did when he tried to do equations at school, for he cannot see the relationship, the connections, between things: 'he could not see the relation between the first two terms and the third' (pp. 29-35).

Peter's memories of England then disperse into a 'chain of disconnected pictures', to reappear, not as a bit of England, forever green, but as arraignment:

Now, as he looked into the crackling blaze [of the fire which he has built on the kopje or hill-top], it seemed to be one of the fires they had made to burn the natives' grain by ... then, he seemed to see his mother's fat ducks waddling down the little path ... Then, he seemed to see his huts where he lived with the prospectors, and the native women who used to live with him; and he wondered where the women were. Then - he saw the skull of an old Mashona blown off at the top, the hands still moving. He heard the loud cry of the native women and children as they turned the maxims onto the kraal, and he heard the dynamite explode that blew up a cave. Then again he was working a maxim gun, but it seemed to him it was more like the reaping machine he used to work in England, and that what was going down before it was not yellow corn, but black men's heads; and he thought when he looked back they lay behind him in rows, like the corn in sheaves (p. 36).

In the final image, the yellow corn of rural England sickeningly transmutes into the mechanistic, efficient slaughter of an African people. It echoes a famous story in the history of the making of Rhodesia, which tells of Rhodes subduing resistance in Pondoland by ordering his troops to mow down a

field of maize with maxim guns, as an object lesson to its people of their fate if they refused compliance.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the corn-into-killing image is one element of a complex set of connecting motifs about food and hunger, which in turn forms a major thread in the dense web of connections and allusions which structure the story.

Peter's fevered and disconnected thoughts come to an end as he suddenly recalls a black woman he and a companion found in the bush, 'her baby on her back, but young and pretty. Well, they didn't shoot her! – and a black woman wasn't white!' (pp. 36-7). Peter's narrative fails here because he thinks of his mother again. He does not yet know that he suffers from unacknowledged guilt, although he does know that he cannot think of his mother, and of what he and his companion did to the young black woman, at the same time. Sexuality, and the nature of the family – which again relates to nurture and feeding – are at the heart of the story.

Released from the lonely fear he felt at the appearance of the stranger, Peter asks him if he has seen 'niggers' in the area. The stranger tells of a wounded man he helped to a pool to drink (this is the captured African Peter will later give water to, and his supper, and for whom he will die), and a woman. The woman of whom Christ speaks is one of two women who have escaped a Company assault and managed to save one basketful of the grain destroyed by the troopers. The woman is very old, but the other woman is young and with child. Each day, in their hiding-place, the old woman doles out rations of the grain – a handful for herself, and two handfuls for the young woman. When the child is born, and the young woman strong, the older sends them on their way to join the remnants of their fleeing tribe; unbeknownst to the young woman, the grain the old woman has given her, is all that was left. "'To-night, at half-past three, [the old woman] will die'", the stranger tells Peter, but not before Peter has fleetingly realized that the young black woman, with her baby on her back and a bundle of corn on her head, for whom the old woman has laid down her life, was the woman that he and his companion had raped in the bush (pp. 62, 36-7).

In this way, the narrative ties together not only bodily and spiritual famine, but also implicates sexual appetite in its web of connections. Like Stead, Schreiner is prepared to suggest that, away from home, English boys will behave very badly indeed. But Schreiner does not content herself with gender stereotypes; instead, Peter's masculinity – including his sexual desire – is subjected to far more sophisticated interrogation. For it is in relation to his sexuality that Africa comes to *mean* something to Peter. For Schreiner (unlike Stead), Africa is by this process made into something other than a vast screen for the projection of English fantasies of atavism and primitivism. This is achieved because for Peter – through the company of women, as I will shortly explain – Africa becomes more than a potential, if often disappointing, pot of gold.

When Peter is first disturbed by the sound of someone approaching the



kopje, he is terrified. He is, however, soon reassured by the stranger's manner and the fact that he is unarmed, and settles down to tell the stranger his favourite campside story. On first arriving in South Africa, Peter worked the mines for a prospector; he tells of how he liked the life, with two huts of his own 'and a couple of nigger girls'. One of the girls was not much more than a child; but the other 'was thirty if she was a day' and Peter had 'set my heart on her the day I saw her'. It was a struggle to get her; the man who owned her had himself 'a devil of a row' in getting her as she had a husband, and two children, of her own. But he did, and the woman worked for him and she made a garden. One day, Peter relates, coming home suddenly, he found her talking to an African man, something he had expressly forbidden. He sent the man away, and forgot him. But the next day the woman asked him for gun cartridges; she said she had to give them to the old woman who helped her to carry water to the garden, for the old woman's son who was going north to hunt elephants. '[She] got over me', Peter tells the stranger, 'because she was going to have a kid, and she said she couldn't do the watering without help.' Hearing about the uprising in Matabeleland, Peter decided to volunteer and left his two Mashona women with instructions to await his return. Within a month of leaving, Peter received a letter from a man with whom he had worked, telling him that the women had gone, within hours of his departure. They left everything except the ammunition Peter had given the older woman, and an old Martini-Henry rifle, and they met an African man some miles off. Indignant, telling his story, Peter is sure the man is the same man he saw talking to the woman, and that he was the woman's African husband. So the woman had been plotting to leave all along: "I shouldn't have minded so much", said Peter after a while, ... "but she was going to have a kid in a month or two" (pp. 43-47). When, at the end of the book, Peter pleads with his Captain for the captured African's life, he repeats over and over again that he thinks he knows the man. He thinks it is the woman's husband.

What, of course, Peter has really discovered is the fellowship of man. But in staging such fellowship, symbolized at the book's end by 'the red sand ... in which a black man and a white man's blood were mingled' (p. 120), Schreiner makes it impossible to avoid the question of *sexual* morality – of double sexual standards and the abuse of women – which was so central to the arguments about women's emancipation in which she was involved throughout the 1880s. It is a commonplace of colonial discourse to deny the African psychological interiority: collective rather than individual – and therefore childishly immature as Rhodes frequently claimed – African identity was seen as having nothing to do with the complex realms of loving and longing. In restoring something like an assumed interiority to the nameless African woman of Peter's story, Schreiner may be involved in a form of projection and appropriation, issuing the woman with a European or western subjectivity. But it is a gesture in which the central demands being made by western women – for self-determination, the right to bodily

integrity, and freedom from sexual coercion – crash through the story and into the colonial scene in the African woman's quiet determination to refind her family.

In her popular collection of allegory stories, *Dreams*, published in 1890, just after she had left England to return to South Africa, Schreiner tells of a woman who dreams she stands before God's throne to plead the case for womankind, and to condemn male oppression. Men have blood on their hands, she says, because of their sexual mistreatment of women. She shows God her own white hands – she is pure; but God points to her feet, which are blood-red. The streets on earth are full of mire the woman protests: "If I should walk straight on in them my outer robe might be bespotted, you see how white it is! And therefore I pick my way." God said, "On what?" (p. 126). The woman realizes that she, too, is complicit in the sin and suffering around her. Here, class differences are the focus of the story: middle-class women's liberation cannot be bought at the cost of working-class degradation. The story is part of Schreiner's criticism of prostitution debates which concentrated entirely on male sexual rapacity instead of seeing prostitution as part of wider economic and familial structures.

In *Trooper Peter*, the case against imperial policy in South Africa transports the stuff of metropolitan female emancipation debates onto the African veld. Here the commodification of the woman is desperate and disgraceful – Peter buys the African woman with a vat of brandy – but it is also inescapably associated with, or rather soldered on to, Peter's fortune-making dreams. These are dreams of imperial adventure in the process of being popularized and romanticized, but they are here emphatically returned to the capitalist-driven exploitation of South Africa being undertaken by Rhodes and his contemporaries. Masculinity is implicated, of course, through the link between sexual and colonial aggression; but so too is femininity – specifically those middle-class western women busy with the process of trying to sort right from wrong in relation to the sexes.

Even more tellingly, perhaps, is that Peter's brittle machismo cannot disguise the psychic complexities Schreiner imports to her allegory of capitalist-imperial greed and destruction. (The story of the African woman is always told for men, around the campfire, and ends with Peter's declaration that, had he known the identity of the African man who came to visit the woman, he would have shot him, there and then.) These are complexities expected, and demanded, in metropolitan gender-debates. Peter loves the African woman; she provides for him and she makes him a garden in the desert. He has an intimation of what this means for him – it means a home, and a family – but absolutely no sense at all of what it might mean for her. Schreiner's readers must be made to feel the violence all round: Peter's psychic defamation, in a colonial context which allows the white man to cost African life so cheaply that humanity itself is imperilled, echoes and mimics the literal violation of the African woman. Unlike Peter, Schreiner's readers must be made to see the relation between things.

## NOTES

1. Stead, founder and editor of the popular *Review of Reviews*, had become disillusioned about British military tactics in South Africa, and lent his propagandistic skills to the pro-Boer and anti-war cause.
2. W.T. Stead, *Methods of Barbarism. 'War is War' and 'War is Hell': The Case for Intervention* (London: Mowbray House, 1901). The title was taken from the Liberal leader Henry Campbell-Bannerman's speech delivered to the National Reform Union in England in June 1901, where he famously declared: 'When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa'.
3. In 1901, Emily Hobhouse, Secretary to the South African Conciliation Committee, a pro-Boer organization which campaigned for an end to the war, reported on conditions in the camps she visited in 1900. See Emily Hobhouse, *Report of a Visit to the Camps of Women and Children in the Cape and Orange River Colonies* (London: Committee of the South African Distress Fund, 1901).
4. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (Toronto: Morang & Co., 1902).
5. Olive Schreiner, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897; Parklands: Ad Donker, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. Stead, p. 77.
7. On Stead and 'The Maiden Tribute', see Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992).
8. Doyle, pp. 81-2.
9. W.T. Stead, *The Truth About the War* (London: Stop the War Committee, 1900), p. 89.
10. See Paula M. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
11. Doyle, pp. 93, 94, 117.
12. Schreiner spent most of the 1880s in England and Europe. For her biography, see Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: A Biography* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980). Stead was an ardent enthusiast for Rhodes. He published the extraordinary *Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes* (London: Review of Reviews, 1902). The quotation is from a letter to Stead in July 1890. Richard Rive ed., *Olive Schreiner Letters: 1871-1899, vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 175.
13. Rive, p. 211.
14. Olive Schreiner and S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Political Situation* (London: Unwin, 1896), p. 3.
15. Even Sir Alfred Milner was shocked by the evidence of the Chartered Company's activities in Mashonaland and Matabeleland. See Milner to Chamberlain, in *The Milner Papers: South Africa 1897-1899*, vol. 1, ed. Cecil Hedlam (London: Cassell, 1931), pp. 139-46.
16. Rive, p. 278.
17. Schreiner met and supported J.A. Hobson whose theory about the relation between capitalism and imperialism was consolidated by witnessing the course of the War. See J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (1902; London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).
18. Rive, p. 273.
19. Rive, p. 288.
20. Stead also uses the Turkish-Armenian conflict as an example of the failure of British policy and protection, in *The Truth About the War*.
21. William Plomer tells this story in *Cecil Rhodes* (1933; Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), p. 73. Its veracity is disputed by some historians. See, for example, T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 3rd edition (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 140.