Olive Schreiner, Masochism, and Omnipotence: Strategies of a Preoedipal Politics

JOHN KUCICH

Late-Victorian culture was saturated with masochistic phenomena—self-destructive New Woman heroines; the “winter” Dionysianism of Beardsley, Swinburne, Pater, and other decadents; the imperial suffering glorified by Kipling, Haggard, and Doyle; the self-flagellations of Hopkins’ Catholicism; even the self-martyring spectacle of the Oscar Wilde trials and of De Profundis (1897). Masochism constituted one of the many “nether worlds” that fin-de-siècle culture explored as revitalizing alternatives to what seemed the increasing hollowness of Victorian society. If Terry Eagleton is right that fin-de-siècle culture performed a “collective intellectual suicide” (17) as it sought forms of experience outside of bourgeois rationality, then masochism might even be described as the privileged psychic structure linking fin-de-siècle experiments with alternative sexualities, the materiality of the aesthetic symbol, or the unconscious itself—whose perverse and sometimes self-destructive energies were first formally theorized in the 1890s.

Perhaps no one exemplifies the centrality of masochism in late-Victorian culture better than Olive Schreiner. Schreiner’s masochistic proclivities have been obvious to anyone familiar with her self-defeating protagonists or with the pathos of her own biography: the head-banging; the infatuations with powerful, bullying men; the family persecutions from which, at the very least, she did little to shield herself. But what makes Schreiner’s masochism particularly useful in understanding fin-de-siècle culture is the wide range of social boundaries it crossed. A native-born South African with British citizenship; a preeminent feminist who wrote instrumentally about race and imperialism; an obscure, bankrupt missionary’s daughter who became the darling of elite London intellectual circles—Schreiner illustrates like no other writer what happens to masochistic fantasy structures as they traverse the domains of gender, class, nation, and race. She is thus an exemplary figure through which to pose questions about how masochism might have mediated between the psyche and the social in late-century culture.

1 See Cronwright-Schreiner for an account of Schreiner’s head-banging as a child (236). Her husband also records that, at a fashionable dinner party in South Africa, Schreiner became so enraged arguing with Cecil Rhodes “that she not only hammered her fists violently on her head and on the table but also banged her forehead on it with such force that the guests actually were alarmed lest she would injure herself” (208). Schreiner confessed to Havelock Ellis that she had a relationship with a sadistic man, in which, according to one of Ellis’s biographers, she “discovered to her horror that she liked being a masochist.” See First and Scott 115. Both the Cronwright-Schreiner and the First and Scott biographies have extensive discussions of the persecutions Schreiner suffered at the hands of various family members.
Schreiner’s masochism, however, has almost exclusively preoccupied feminist readers—not simply because of the vexed theoretical relationship between masochism and feminism, but also, in part, because of cultural assumptions that have tied masochism rigidly to sexuality since the institutionalization of that linkage in 1890s sexology. Feminist readers have also been troubled, understandably, by the self-punitive turn taken by some currents in the late-Victorian women’s movement that Schreiner seems to exemplify. While many late-century feminists continued to attack sexual oppression through the liberal discourse of women’s rights established by Wollstonecraft and Mill, others made women themselves their critical targets. As Schreiner herself once wrote: “It is not against man we have to fight but against ourselves within ourselves” (Rive 145). Second-wave feminists were repelled by a number of painful and seemingly perverse constraints some New Woman writers placed on themselves: a rigid code of sexual self-denial, often presented as a politicized gesture; a programmatic defeatism, which transformed disappointment with women’s social prospects into postures of saintly martyrdom; and an idealization of self-sacrifice (particularly maternal self-sacrifice), which has been viewed either as a concession to eugenics or a residue of mid-Victorian gender ideology. In these various ways, despite late-century feminism’s official repudiations of decadence, some women writers evidently shared the decadents’ fascination with the transformative power of pain.

Schreiner’s masochism, in particular, has not had a good press—particularly among 1970s and 1980s feminists. It has long been recognized, of course, that Schreiner was on the leading edge of New Woman feminism when she wrote *Story of an African Farm* in 1883 and that her *Woman and Labor* (the first part of which was published in 1899) was commonly referred to at the time as “the Bible” of the suffragette movement. Yet second-wave feminists struggled to

2 The “New Woman” was a notoriously plural figure. See, for example, Ardis 10-14. For a discussion of “equal rights” feminists and their campaigns for constitutional, civic, and economic rights for women, see Ledger, New Woman 15, 37.

3 Showalter condemns New Woman self-punitiveness, claiming extravagantly that “in this generation [of feminists] female suicide became conspicuous for the first time” (Literature 194). In *Sexual Anarchy*, Showalter moderates her view of Schreiner, but still calls her an example of New Woman “bitterness and disillusionment” (57). Rowbotham disparages Schreiner’s feminism as a mysticism of shared pain (94). Boumelha also lodges the complaint that New Woman novels recuperate mid-Victorian sexual ideology through female self-sacrifice (85). For other second-wave feminist critiques of New Woman self-denial, see Cunningham 64 and Stubbs 126. Pykett notes the tendency of New Woman writers to represent defeatism as saintliness (157).

4 On late-century feminist disgust with decadence, see Ledger, New Woman 94, 111.

5 Showalter describes Lyndall, in *Story of an African Farm*, as the “first wholly serious feminist heroine” (Literature 199); Walkowitz claims that the novel was “second only to Mill’s *Subjection of Women* in communicating the wrongs of womanhood to late-Victorians” (139). Ardis gives a more measured account of *Story of an African Farm’s* place in 1880s feminist fiction (31). Burdett usefully catalogues the “New Woman” ideas anticipated by Schreiner, including her notions about the relationship between marriage and prostitution, the effects of female socialization, the hypocrisy of chivalry, and the relationship between intellectual and sexual passion (31).
separate what they valued in Schreiner's work from her harsh fictional stereotypes of women, her uncompromising destruction of her own heroines, her idealization of selfless maternity and female self-sacrifice, and her obsession with guilt and expiation. Such critics stigmatized Schreiner's "pervasive will to fail," as Elaine Showalter called it (Literature 198). Their exclusive focus on questions of gender oppression also helped confine Schreiner's masochism to the realm of sexual politics, obscuring its connection to other social, cultural, or psychological phenomena.

Beginning in the 1990s, however, Schreiner has become more identified with discourses of mastery than submission. Recent critics have judged her as racist and imperialist for some of the very same tendencies—particularly her idealizations of sexual purity and maternal self-sacrifice—that troubled the preceding generation of critics, who saw these same gestures as concessions to male power. Schreiner's exaltation of these kinds of female ascesis are now often seen (sometimes rather smugly) as complicit with eugenic and evolutionary discourses that privileged the white, middle-class female—whose maternal mission and sexual purity Schreiner and other New Woman writers are reputed to have celebrated as the engine of British racial superiority. Yet this recent preoccupation with Schreiner's supposed collusion in discourses of racial and imperial mastery has only deepened the critical disavowal of masochism as an effective political instrument. Recent approaches, while moving beyond sexual politics to embrace wider political frameworks of analysis, have even more fully marginalized the progressive politics of New Woman masochism. Anne McClintock, for example, refers patronizingly to a "sad logic of Christian masochism" that lay at the bottom of Schreiner's "tortuous logic of gender rebellion and guilt," producing "an obscure economy of feminine identity through denial" (262). But McClintock then claims that the "flight into fantasy" (264) with which Schreiner escaped her masochistic inversion opened a gap between sexual and racial politics. This realm of fantasy—which, according to McClintock, affirmed a "persecuted community of truth-seekers" (264) united by their mystical faith—"blind[ed] [Schreiner] to the colonial cast" of her mysticism and "concealed the very real history of colonial plunder" (266). McClintock typifies the critical shift of the last decade, which has separated Schreiner's sexualized masochism, and its apparent refusals of sexual power, from her participation in colonialist discourses of mastery—even though her colonial attitudes still seem to derive in some obscure way from female ascesis. By shifting the political domains within which Schreiner's self-martyring tactics are said to have functioned, succeeding critical generations appear to have each been viewing one half of the dynamics of

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6 Showalter's critique in Literature has been a constant reference point for this critical tradition. See also First and Scott's excellent biography, which attributes Schreiner's inconsistencies, more forgivingly, to the "contradictory expectations of the self-affirming woman" (18), and McClintock.

7 A number of works studying these topics have appeared recently, including McClintock, Ledger, Burdett, Krebs, and Chrisman. Criticism of Schreiner's racism has a long history—it is only recently that this criticism has seemed to drown out the ideological relevance of feminist masochism. For earlier critiques, see Gordimer or First and Scott 293.
sadomasochism in Schreiner’s work, while obscuring the other. More importantly, as I will argue at the end of this essay, what links both generations of Schreiner’s detractors is their disavowal of feminism’s debt to the politics of masochism—a disavowal that sometimes takes the form of contemporary critical fantasies of moral and political omnipotence that disguise their dependence on the very same logic of masochistic victimage they proudly reject.

In this essay, I will attempt to redress both the confinement of Schreiner’s masochism to the realm of sexuality—which, I believe, has resulted in far too pessimistic a view of its potentials as a feminist strategy—and the recent over-emphasis on imperialist mastery in her South African writings. In the first half of the paper, I will reread Schreiner’s feminist strategies in the context of a non-sexualized, preoedipal model of masochism, which can help illuminate the political potency of certain late-Victorian gestures of feminist self-wounding. In the second half, I will use this same preoedipal model to analyze the political strategies of Schreiner’s writings on South Africa. In the process, I hope to link her feminist and imperial discourses through the political category most neglected in studies of masochism—that of social class. Schreiner’s inconsistencies on questions of race owe a great deal to the peculiar relationship in her thinking between masochism and social class. But it is also through a discourse of class that her feminism coheres with her defense—however selective—of certain victims of British imperialism. In making these arguments, I am seeking less to rescue Schreiner from her critics, past or present, than to restore the political complexities of masochism—which, like other psychological or symbolic processes, often crosses social boundaries in dynamic ways.

1. Masochism and the Preoedipal

In order to trace these various relationships, I must begin by proposing a way of understanding masochism that deviates from the conventional view that its origins lie in sexuality. Despite a flurry of recent work on masochism, cultural theory has generally ignored both the non-sexual and the preoedipal dimensions of masochism, privileging instead masochism’s relationship to oedipal sexuality. Cultural theory has thus reflected popular assumptions that masochism is fundamentally an expression of forbidden sexual desire and that it eroticizes power differentials modeled on those between father and child. This equation of masochism with oedipal sexuality has long been reinforced by both Freudian and Lacanian traditions.8 While recent cultural theorists have sometimes moved

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8 In “Instincts” and in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud argued that all masochism is rooted in “erotogenic masochism.” In “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” he saw even so-called “moral masochism” as a deviation caused by sexual guilt—a deviation that is always resexualized. In “A Child is Being Beaten,” he located the Oedipus complex at the heart of the beating fantasy. Lacan reunderstood Freud’s concept of primary masochism in terms of the compulsion to repeat, which he equated with entry into the symbolic and, therefore, with the oedipal crisis (80-83). See also Laplanche’s famous post-structuralist reading of masochism (85-102), in which he declares: “we shall [...] reserve the terms sadistic (sadism) and masochistic (masochism) for tendencies, activities, fantasies, etc., that necessarily involve, either
away from psychoanalysis in order to politicize masochism, and to give it a distinct social and cultural history, they have nevertheless retained many of the themes and configurations of the oedipal model. Most continue to over-value masochistic sexuality, usually regarding S/M as the standard model. But even those who abstract masochism from sexuality, regarding it as a general trope for power relations, tend to preserve the oedipal oppositions of dominance and submission—along with the thematics of punishment, forbidden desire, and potentially subversive abjection—that characterize the oedipal narrative.

While literary and cultural critics have made considerable use of relational psychoanalysis in a variety of contexts—particularly its attention to the preoedipal stage—studies of masochism have been surprisingly immune to it. Relational models, however, can offer cultural theory an expanded metaphorics for masochism, one that supplements the oedipal frameworks of eroticized mastery and submission it currently favors. Relational approaches to masochism vary considerably, but their persistent focus on preoedipal conflicts of individuation and separation has foregrounded the role played by infantile fantasies of omnipotence. Edmund Bergler first formulated this perspective in *The Basic Neurosis* (1949); and in *Fearful Symmetry* (1996), the most comprehensive recent study, Jack and Kelly Novick declare: “there is more to a masochistic fantasy than omnipotence but the delusion of omnipotence is a necessary part of it” (61). The “omnipotent system,” as the Novicks call it, reimagines many sites of conceptual ordering besides binary hierarchies of power, and it addresses a wide variety of intersubjective conflicts. In the work of recent clinicians, though, omnipotent fantasy has been considered primarily as a response to preoedipal dysfunction—in particular, as a rejection of the structural barriers that intervene between the self and others, or else as a defense of narcissistic delusions of self-sufficiency. That is to say, omnipotent fantasy has been widely understood (by theorists such as Arnold Cooper, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, Peter Blos, and others) to resolve preoedipal conflicts between dependence and autonomy by making either alternative seem an absolute—or else, by imagining these alternatives, in some magical way, to be non-contradictory.

Relational theorists have identified multiple psychic pathways through which preoedipal pain might be transformed into fantasies of omnipotence. Self-inflicted pain might enhance the masochist’s sense of control over others, for example, by manipulating their sympathy or provoking a punitive response. But the “omnipotent system” can also make dependence more satisfying by shoring up the authority of nurturers—that is, by attributing to the abusive parent an omnipotence that might seem potentially protective, not just hurtful. The masochist might also disavow infantile rage by displacing it onto seemingly ma-

consciously or unconsciously, an element of sexual excitement or enjoyment” (87; emphasis in original).

9 For a good overview of recent cultural theories of masochism, see Finke and Niekerk. One example among many of a theorist who restores the political and social history of masochism while still viewing it exclusively either as a sexual practice or as political theater based on sexual positionings is Noyes.

10 For a good summary of recent clinical approaches, see Glick and Meyers 1-25.
levolent figures. Omnipotent fantasy can also assuage feelings of loss and separation, which might for whatever reason seem more threatening than fear of punishment. If parental figures have become identified with the pain they cause, then aggravating such pain can magically evoke their presence and overcome separation anxiety. As one patient reported to the Novicks: “When I’m feeling good, I feel all alone; when I’m feeling bad, I’m with my mother” (23). But in contrast to oedipal masochism, preoedipal forms of masochism can also sustain omnipotence in the absence of a powerful or punitive other. Sensations of self-sufficiency may come simply from the ritualization of suffering. Alternatively, the sense of being unloved may be transformed into a general feeling of special competence and self-sufficiency. Omnipotent fantasy may also dissolve a variety of conceptual boundaries that obstruct intimacy by eliding them with the dissolving boundary between pain and pleasure—boundaries of temporality, gender, or generation, for instance. Most important, self-wounding may limit the dysphoria that can be caused by omnipotent fantasy itself, if it seems to unleash dangerously transformative energies, or desires for power, that can only be safely regulated through the same self-punitive behavior that has generated omnipotence in the first place.

As Jane Flax has pointed out, relational theory’s rejection of the drive model causes it to overlook the erotic lives of both mothers and infants and to downplay the sexual conflicts articulated in the oedipal stage (120-26). Yet some contemporary analysts, inspired by the efforts of Otto Kernberg, Heinz Kohut, and others to formulate developmental models that mediate between drive and relational theory, have tried to distance unproductive arguments about the oedipal or preoedipal determinants of masochism. These analysts have argued that, while masochistic fantasy may first arise in response to preoedipal failures, it can be altered substantially in oedipal or postoedipal stages. The Novicks, for example, argue that omnipotent fantasy links all three developmental phases together and that none should be seen as a privileged origin (93). Their account also suggests that the transgression of these developmental boundaries may itself represent a form of omnipotent fantasy—an attempt to deny the difference between infantile and adult relationships.

Schreiner’s work shows quite clearly how oedipal and preoedipal desires might be merged with preoedipal masochistic fantasy. Her tendency to equate punitive sexual objects with comforting preoedipal ones was fundamental to her reformulation of sexual love and to a number of other feminist projects in her work, including her struggle with scientific discourses of sexual difference. In Part One of Story of an African Farm, for example, Schreiner begins by distinctly articulating the difference between preoedipal and oedipal forms of masochistic suffering. In the punishment of Waldo by Bonaparte Blenkins, she evacuates a classic oedipal beating scene of oedipal content. As Blenkins ties Waldo up, he demands Waldo’s “submission” and speaks of himself as a “father” who has to “check and correct” Waldo (106-07). Symbolically faithful to the oedipal script, Blenkins accuses Waldo of forbidden desire for the dried fruits—stored in an inaccessible attic—that belong to the woman Blenkins himself desires sexually. The scene of paternal punishment is itself heavily eroticized: Blenkins calls for
Waldo’s “naked” back and dramatically strips him by slitting his shirt with a penknife. The beating scene is also classically triangulated by two women: Tant’ Sannie, the object of Blenkins’s desires, and Lyndall, the novel’s feminist heroine, who identifies vicariously with Waldo’s suffering while at the same time basking in her immunity from it.

Yet this scene of oedipal sadomasochism fails to come off. Waldo registers no emotional response whatsoever to Blenkins, refusing to cry out or even to speak to him during the beating. Aside from “a wild fitful terror in his eyes” (108), which utterly deflates Blenkins’ sadism when he notices it, Waldo remains strangely numb both to Blenkins and to the lash itself. Imprisoned for the night afterwards, he “had been very strong, had never been tired, never felt pain.” The “terror” in his eyes, it turns out, comes not from the beating, but from his sense of being abandoned to Blenkins by God. After the beating, Waldo “could not feel Him. He prayed aloud, very loud, and he got no answer; when he listened, it was all quite quiet.” Waldo’s “terror” thus derives not from forbidden sexual desire, paternal punishment, or guilt; rather, it derives from the preoedipal trauma of abandonment and neglect he associates with a cruelly unresponsive deity. In the novel’s very first scene, Waldo lies awake at night, tormented by the thought of the multitudes God consigns to hell without mercy for their suffering. Soon after, he is devastated by God’s apparent failure to accept the sacrifice of his mutton chop, when no fire flashes out of the heavens to consume it in response to his prayers. Waldo’s inability to accept divine abandonment fuels a series of anguished intellectual speculations, following the familiar paths of nineteenth-century freethought, in which he tries to renew his spiritual faith. His religious crisis, one of the novel’s two great themes (together with Lyndall’s precocious feminism) is driven not by concerns with dogma, but by despair over what appears to be an abandoning and uncaring deity, whose withdrawal is evident in the absence of purpose or order in the universe. It is this preoedipal trauma that his beating reawakens, not the oedipal crisis staged by Blenkins—who actually epitomizes, in his ineffectualness, the absence of proper paternal authority on the farm.11

Lyndall’s relationships with men in Part Two of the novel continue to privilege the preoedipal over the oedipal contents of masochism. But they also begin to effect the merger of preoedipal fantasy with sexual sadomasochism that will come to characterize Schreiner’s feminist ideals for sexual love. Many readers have seen Story of an African Farm as an indictment of the sadomasochism that Schreiner supposedly identified with heterosexual relations—which have been read by some as metaphors for colonialism as well.12 But the novel does not consistently distance sadomasochistic sexuality, as it so strikingly does in the scene of Waldo’s beating; rather, it sometimes explores the continuities that might link

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11 Gilbert and Gubar make this point 56-57.

12 For example, Monsman sees Tant’ Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins as the model for patterns of dominance and submission that he claims the novel rejects (585). Monsman also believes that Schreiner critiques imperialism’s relationship to sadomasochism, as does Duplessis (23-24). Gilbert and Gubar also assume that Schreiner critiques sadomasochism in various contexts (63).
sadomasochistic sexuality to preoedipal fantasy. Lyndall’s affair with a sadistic stranger, which results in her own death as well as that of her illegitimate child, has commonly been read as a warning about conventional heterosexual relations, and Lyndall has often been seen as the victim of her own contradictory desires for both feminist assertiveness and sexual submission. But the preoedipal content that suffuses her sexual masochism engages it with infantile fantasy and thus places it in a complex, productive relationship to Schreiner’s feminist ideals.

Lyndall’s sexual desires are themselves unmistakably masochistic—she loves her stranger because he is “the first man I ever was afraid of” (219)—and she tells him: “you love me because you cannot bear to be resisted, and want to master me.” Yet her sexual masochism is oddly mixed with non-erotic desires for an omnipotent caretaker, infantile wishes for an omnipotent love. Lyndall’s self-destructive plan to run off with her stranger, unmarried, is in part an attempt to transform him into a parental, rather than simply a sexual, partner. “You may take me away with you, and take care of me” (220), she tells him, and, as they plan their flight together, she adopts the postures of a wounded child. “She looked into his eyes,” we are told, “as a little child might whom a long day’s play had saddened” (221). He assumes a complementary parental role, calling her “Poor little thing!” and observing in surprise: “You are only a child.” Though his affair with her ends, predictably, in abandonment, he later beseeches her to let him return in a protective parental role: “My darling,” he writes, “let me put my hand round you, and guard you from the world. As my wife they shall never touch you. I have learned to love you more wisely, more tenderly, than of old; you shall have perfect freedom” (259). Lyndall’s affair thus mixes sexual sadomasochism with wishes for an ideal preoedipal world: dependence on an omnipotent figure who promises to grant both full protection and “perfect freedom,” the kind of freedom she had always known that marriage, while sparing her social suicide, would never have provided. It was in search of such “perfect freedom,” however illusory, that she had chosen an unmarried liaison rather than marriage in the first place.

The transformation of Lyndall’s sadistic lover into an omnipotent parent who gratifies all wishes (even contradictory wishes for both dependence and autonomy) was not a resolution Schreiner endorsed. This conflation of oedipal and preoedipal objects of desire is, in principle, an unattainable fantasy, an instance of omnipotent thinking. But the novel does magically realize precisely such a fantasy in its concluding episodes, through the figure of Gregory Rose. A would-be domineering lover, Gregory is fantastically transformed into a nurturing mother-figure for Lyndall. Discovering her abandoned and terminally ill, Gregory cross-dresses and poses as her nurse. Usually understood as an exploration of androgyny, or of enlightened masculinity, or even of homosexuality, Gregory’s cross-dressing should also be seen as the logical culmination of Lyndall’s search for a preoedipal pleasure economy within sexual

13 See, for example, Lane 95 or Bristow xix.
sadomasochism. Lyndall’s self-induced suffering magically turns Gregory into both a controlling male lover and an obedient mother, who gratifies all wishes. Gregory ministers to her every need as he nurses her through her last days, refusing even to deflate the delusional fantasies of recovery she maintains to the bitter end.

Gregory’s own omnipotent delusions, which had once fueled his naïve expectations of sexual mastery, are strangely realized through his chivalrous—but possessive—service. He finds himself “glorified” (254) by this service and rises above all human “wish for rest” (260). Yet Gregory’s power as Lyndall’s nurse has more in common with masochistic omnipotent fantasy than with sadistic control. Earlier in the novel, Lyndall had described him as a masochist: he is “like a little tin duck floating on a dish of water, that comes after a piece of bread stuck on a needle, and the more the needle pricks it the more it comes on” (213). Though she taunts him, Lyndall recognizes the masochistic affinity that they share: “I too could love so,” she says, “that to lie under the foot of the thing I love would be more heaven than to lie in the breast of another” (214). The novel’s conclusion thus transforms what had earlier been an overt struggle for sexual domination into a scene of mutual masochism that dissolves gender boundaries, while also gratifying the preoedipal wishes of omnipotent fantasy. Whatever the asymmetries of desire and self-awareness that separate Gregory and Lyndall, their shared masochistic tableau allegorically sexualizes the relationship between nursing mother and suffering child, at the same time that it desexualizes adult desire through preoedipal fantasies that entwine nurturance with pain. The novel’s magical thinking thus proceeds on several levels at once. In Gregory and Lyndall’s odd coupling, self-aggravated suffering elicits loving care, while still preserving the masochist’s freedom and control, thus resolving conflicts between autonomy and dependence. At the same time, male and female sexual difference seems to dissolve in a general masochistic fusion of sexual desire, suffering, and omnipotent fantasy.

Given the tragedy of Lyndall’s death—which torments conventional readerly expectations as well as those of the characters—these scenes would appear to critique omnipotent fantasy in general and, in particular, the phantasmatic wish to have a dominating lover who is also an all-pleasing mother. Surely, no reader could recognize the relationship between the dying Lyndall and Gregory as a positive sexual ideal of some kind? But, as I have suggested, the “omnipotent system” can use punitive self-critique as a way to regulate dangerous, omnipotent fantasies. Schreiner’s relentless pessimism, which cruelly frustrates characters, readers, and, in various ways, the author herself, can be understood as an attack on certain fantasies about sexual union that nevertheless preserves and regulates these fantasies within the psychic economies of masochism.

While many critics have seen Gregory as an androgynous figure, most have found him to be an unsatisfying one. See, for example, Lane 97. Bristow speaks of Gregory’s incipient homosexuality (xxi), but Ledger finds him to be a homophobic representation of the “New Man” (New Woman 83). Barash, while discussing Gregory more positively than most critics, nevertheless complains that only men are allowed to cross gender lines in the novel (273).
2. The Masochistic Logic of Feminism

Schreiner always directed her relentless, annihilating authorial intelligence against characters with whose deepest desires she clearly identified or against beliefs that she herself appears to have held. In Story of an African Farm, she seemed to reject the notion that a lover who causes pain might at the same time be a mother who assuages pain. But in her later work, the merger of masochistic heterosexual love with preoedipal fantasy occupied a central place in her ideals for sexual equality. It occurs repeatedly in the feminist allegories collected in her influential volume Dreams (1890). Though Schreiner shared the late-century feminist conviction that sexual desire could be rationally reformulated, it was in her dreamlike fables, which channel unconscious energies into surreal fictional forms, that she most powerfully imagined a utopian sexuality. In these allegories, Schreiner erased the power differentials between men and women that haunt heroines of her realistic fiction like Lyndall. She set her stories instead in a future when sexual struggle has seemingly been transcended. In this mythological space, her fables conceive ideal heterosexual unions that revolve around preoedipal gratification—particularly, the gratification of contradictory wishes for both autonomy and dependence. Yet the masochistic nature of these gratifications persists in Schreiner’s organization of heterosexual love entirely around the pain of actively sought renunciation and loss. Schreiner’s acceptance of suffering as the psychological condition necessary for egalitarian sexual union caused her to celebrate images of mutual masochism that idealize the same conjunction of sexuality, loss, and omnipotence that she seemed to critique in her “realistic” portrait of Lyndall and Gregory Rose.

In “The Lost Joy,” for example, a couple’s blissful sexual union results in a child, the eponymous “Joy” of the title. Yet, after some passage of time, the couple loses this child, only to find another, sadder child in its place—one to whom they feel even more deeply attached, though they remain haunted by a sense of loss for the first child. Their attachment is so strong that they refuse to exchange this second, melancholy child for the one called “Joy,” even when a figure named “Reflection” offers them this magical choice. Finally, Reflection explains that the first child is actually identical to the second, though its name has been changed to “Sympathy,” as they might have known from the nurturing, compassionate services it constantly renders them. Reflection declares that Sympathy, despite the chronic loss of joy inscribed within its very identity, is, in fact, “the Perfect Love” (12).

Throughout these feminist fables, idealized relations between men and women are imagined in terms of mutual sympathy, which—echoing a persistent wish of New Woman writing—replaces the potential aggression and violence of sexual desire (especially male desire) with a uniformly nurturant but melancholic ideal. But Schreiner’s heterosexual fables never represent perfectly sympathetic

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15 See Walkowitz on the aspirations for a rational sexual utopia within the Men and Women’s Club, of which Schreiner was an original member (136).

16 Berkman, Olive Schreiner 49-50, discusses the priority of this kind of gratification in Dreams.
love as free of pain. Quite the contrary, their bittersweet tone derives from their idealizing attempts to incorporate pain as the very essence of sympathetic sexual love. The female protagonist of “In a Far-Off World,” to cite another example, wanting to give her male partner the best possible happiness, visits a shrine where it is said that if one “knelt on the steps of the stone altar, and uncovering one’s breast, so wounded it that the blood fell down on the altar steps, then whatever he who knelt there wished for was granted him” (39). Thus wounding herself and wishing for whatever might be best for her lover, the woman is told by a mysterious voice that “the best of all gifts for him [...] is that he might leave you” (41). After a compact moment of great grief, the woman responds, calmly: “I am contented” (42). Similarly, in the story “Life’s Gifts,” the allegorical figure of Life forces a woman to choose between Love and Freedom. Only after the woman renounces Love does Life then tell her that, as a reward, “the day will come” (78) when she will have both.

Schreiner’s fables consistently revolve around preoedipal masochistic economies, in which unqualified states of loss, intersubjective fusion, and self-sufficiency form a circuit of exchange. In these fables, pain is mastered by being turned into a sign of absolute self-sufficiency, while self-sufficiency becomes the necessary condition for completely fusional love, the wholeness and security of which can only be measured through its tolerance for seemingly intolerable pain. The tendency of Schreiner’s fables to figure concepts like love, freedom, and joy as monolithic abstractions and to unite them in extraordinarily stark conjunctions with loss and renunciation betrays the logic of omnipotent fantasy at work. There are no realistic compromises between emotional extremes in these fables, only an economy of profound psychological antitheses. Schreiner’s feminist fables have always been appreciated for their affirmation of sexual equality and for their celebration of female psychological independence. But these ideals, which in one form or another lie at the heart of much late-century feminist writing, need to be understood as deeply entangled in masochistic omnipotent fantasy and in its potential to reimagine sexual difference as a phantasmagoric site for the resolution of preoedipal wishes. Some readers have complained that Schreiner wanted sexual freedom only in order to transcend sexuality and that she idealized non-sexual relationships. It seems more accurate to say that, through masochism, she wanted to fuse sexuality with preoedipal pleasure economies.

Masochistic fantasy saturates Schreiner’s thinking about collective feminist struggle as well, including the relationship she tried to forge between feminism and late-century scientific thought. Drawing on the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and the eugenic theories of Karl Pearson, Schreiner argued in Woman and Labor (1911) that feminist demands could be justified only in the context of women’s obligations to the species as a whole: “the women of no race or class will ever rise in revolt [...] however intense their suffering and however clear their perception of it, while the welfare and persistence of their society requires their submission” (6-7). Arguing that the over-dependence of women on men, which she called “sex parasitism,” ultimately threatened the survival of the human species, Schreiner stressed the urgency of women’s access to productive

See, for example, Berkman, Healing Imagination 152.
labor. But she also stressed the necessarily self-sacrificing nature of that labor, following Pearson’s insistence that the instinctual lives of individuals be submerged within the needs of the social whole, which, for him, meant the devotion of women to maternity. By linking feminist demands for productive labor to this eugenic discourse, Schreiner risked conflating pro-feminist attitudes with an uncompromising view of female self-sacrifice. Feminist efforts can never be “of immediate advantage to themselves, but [...] almost of necessity and immediately lead to loss and renunciation, which gives to this movement its very peculiar tone” (125). Seemingly conscripted into the eugenicist’s view of motherhood as the foundation of the state, Woman and Labor also appears to import the racist rhetoric of late-century evolutionist thought. Yet its arguments resonated powerfully within a feminist culture that—in the fiction of Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and other novelists, as well as in “eugenic feminist” writing—equated female sexual self-denial, along with female powers of judicious sexual selection, with an evolutionary and progressive social morality.

A long tradition in Victorian gender ideology designated middle-class women as guardians of society only by consigning them to the selfless realms of moral education and childbearing. But Schreiner’s willingness to embrace the most brutally scientific versions of this tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century unleashed elements of masochistic fantasy that account for much of the power of her sexual politics. Understanding the unconscious fantasy structures at work in Woman and Labor, I would argue, is thus as important as analyzing the intellectual contents of Schreiner’s argument. While there have been tangled debates among recent critics about whether Schreiner should be read as a strategic appropriator of evolutionist and eugenic discourses or as a co-opted reactionary, the masochistic fantasy structures underlying Woman and Labor can better help us understand its power to fuel feminist activism by drawing our attention to the preoedipal fantasies it engages.

Most importantly, the central terminology of Woman and Labor derives from a preoedipal—rather than a purely political—conception of women’s oppression. Schreiner’s fears about female “parasitism,” the keyword in Woman and Labor, evoke familiar preoedipal issues of autonomy and separation. That is to say,
Schreiner’s anxieties about “parasitism” can be seen as the flip side of her characteristic preoccupation with abandonment. Over-dependence and under-nourishment both signal failures in the achievement of stable intersubjective relations. In this sense, Schreiner’s critique of female “parasitism,” like her concerns with the abandonment of suffering children in her fiction, begins in anxieties about the psychic independence of women, anxieties that mediate much of her thinking about equal wages, voting rights, or other more directly political issues.

Schreiner’s preoccupation with “parasitism” also led directly to the masochistic feminist solutions she proposed. Her view of “labor” as a medium of self-sacrifice, not a means to advancement or self-actualization, was one of the most important of these solutions: “The Woman’s Movement,” she wrote, “is essentially not a movement on the part of civilized women in search of greater enjoyment and physical ease” (Thoughts 205). Schreiner associated labor—seen as a fundamental condition of female self-sufficiency—not so much with political economy as with women’s special, stoical capacity to accept suffering and pain. In early human history, “labor more toilsome and unending than that of man was ours; yet did we never cry out that it was too heavy for us” (Woman 28). Schreiner repeatedly mourned an earlier time in which “an excessive and almost crushing amount of the most important social labor generally devolved upon the female” (Woman 44-45), for, in her view of human evolution, it had always been the redemptive and empowering role of woman to endure more than man.

By linking feminist demands with an idealization of suffering, Schreiner generated an omnipotent phantasmagorics. She endowed feminism with tremendous social and psychological authority by representing women’s demands as the antithesis of self-interest and as crucial to the survival, not just of women, but of the entire human race. “Give us labor and the training which fits for labor!” she declares, famously, in Woman and Labor, “We demand this, not for ourselves alone, but for the race” (27). The grandiosity of this claim was echoed by “social purity” feminists, who argued that the eugenic priority of women’s maternal role should entitle women to dominate social policy-making. But while many late-century feminists used eugenic discourse about motherhood to present women as “race regenerators,” Schreiner’s masochistic emphasis on female capacities for suffering produced a more grandiose and more racially undifferentiated claim: that laboring women might redeem the entire human race.

More important than Schreiner’s posture of self-martyring altruism, however, was the vagueness of her masochistic grandiosity. Woman and Labor is not at all precise about the kinds of female labor it values, or the social goals to which such labor should be devoted. Schreiner’s vagueness enabled her to circumvent troubling late-century feminist contradictions, particularly, conflicts between the virtues of self-sufficiency and of service, or between female autonomy and the sexual ideal of the couple. Schreiner’s rhetoric solved such problems in

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22 See Walkowitz on the furor created within the Men and Women’s Club by Henrietta Muller’s advancement of this claim (151). Schreiner made similar—if more moderate—claims in Woman and Labor: we may “in the future, discover that those changes in human conditions, which have done away with the primary necessity for muscular force and pugilistic arts, have also inverted her place in the scale of social values” (224).
omnipotent rather than rational terms, by merging images of heroic autonomy and fusional solidarity through its exaltation of suffering. Woman and Labor also aligned feminists with martyrs to all kinds of triumphant causes—the scientific revolution, democratic movements, the Protestant Reformation, and any other social transformation Schreiner deemed infallibly progressive. Above all, Schreiner’s blurring of conceptual differences allowed her to adopt an evolutionary defense of maternity, while also affirming the province of female “labor” in expansive metaphorical terms. Unlike Pearson, Schreiner allowed the concept of female labor to float free across distinctions between economic production and sexual reproduction. While idealizing maternity, she also insisted that motherhood alone was not sufficient to guarantee women’s social productivity, even though her augmented standards for such productivity were never made specific. Schreiner’s collapsing of the opposition between suffering and self-assertion allowed her to collapse the ideological opposition between different forms of female labor as well.

The vagueness of Woman and Labor has been one of the charges leveled against it by contemporary feminist criticism. I would argue, however, that the book’s vagueness is a crucial source of its unconscious power. Omnipotent fantasy is by its very nature anti-realistic. Schreiner’s imprecision allowed her to link feminist martyrdom with a utopianism that refused to be limited by the scientific discourses of female renunciation that it masochistically inhabited. Instead, Schreiner poetized these discourses to evoke the preoedipal gratifications that, for her, lay at the heart of feminist struggle: idealizing a magical fusion of dependence with autonomy, Schreiner exalted service to the species as the essence of feminist self-assertion. This conjunction did not represent a tactical manipulation or appropriation so much as it engaged preoedipal fantasy structures that are fundamental throughout Schreiner’s writings on sexuality. Her conjunctions of martyrdom and omnipotence, with all their problematic complexity as a political rhetoric, powerfully mobilized preoedipal masochistic fantasy. The potency of such fantasy is not easily dismissed, or separated out of her work; nor is it easily reduced to a single set of political potentials. But the relationship between preoedipal masochistic fantasy and political representations of collective struggle was clearly a productive one—no matter how it strikes contemporary readers—as is suggested by the recollections of suffragettes who read Dreams aloud to one another from their prison cells.

3. Masochism and the Regeneration of Middle-Class Culture

Just as Schreiner used preoedipal forms of masochism to envision a new political identity for women, she also used them to reinvent a middle-class political subject in South Africa. A great deal of her South African writings in the 1890s revolved around this singular project: the recreation of a notional—if not always a nominal—South African middle class, grounded in a particular relationship to

\footnote{See, for example, McClintock 292 and Ledger, New Woman 42.}

\footnote{See Lytton 187.}
preoedipal masochism. As I have suggested earlier, Schreiner’s attitudes toward race were deeply mediated by a class politics that structured her attitudes toward social collectivity through the psychic economies of masochism. In particular, her attitudes toward racial difference devolved from her attempts to reconstruct a South African middle class around preoedipal forms of masochism. In the course of this project, Schreiner used both ideological materials that resonated with traditional English conceptions of middle-class political objectives and masochistic psychological structures that parallel certain evangelical values she made to stand in for both “middle class” and “English” social identities. Before I discuss the relevance of masochism to Schreiner’s writings on class, though, I must first explain why Schreiner needed to reinvent middle-class identity in the first place.

Schreiner’s well-known contempt for bourgeois culture was the flip side of her efforts to reform it—a project it was no doubt easier to imagine against the inchoate social background of South Africa, where political identities in the late nineteenth century were up for grabs, than it might have been in England. Schreiner’s writings on South Africa mirror the confusions and obscurities of social stratification that disturbed her about her colonial homeland. But in their confused and confusing way, these writings consistently lamented the disordering of South Africa’s class structure, particularly what Schreiner saw as a disturbance in, or an evacuation of, the middle ranks. They also seized on this disordering as a kind of sociological blank slate on which to project certain revised middle-class political values.

Schreiner often complained about the disordering of social class in South Africa, especially on her return in 1889, after spending eight years in England and Europe. But her attempts to define the source of this disorder in the social middle were often obscure. At times, her attacks were directed straightforwardly against the vulgarity of the middle ranks. In 1890, she complained repeatedly to Havelock Ellis: “Fancy a whole nation of lower middle-class people” (Rive 172). At times, though, what she seemed to miss was some kind of organic society—composed of distinct, complementary classes—that might hold the social middle in its proper place. To Ellis, again, she wrote: “Fancy a whole nation of lower middle-class Philistines, without an aristocracy of blood or intellect or of muscular labourers to save them” (Rive 168). Similarly, to Edward Carpenter, she complained of the absence of an intellectual class, which might form a counterweight to the lower-middle-class philistine: “There are no people that think or care about social or impersonal subjects in this country, that I’ve found. They are all philistines. It’s so funny to find a whole nation of philistines without the other element at all” (Rive 206).

Schreiner wavered in defining what, exactly, was missing in the South African social middle: intellectual culture, the self-sufficiency she identified with labor, or ethical refinement. Most often, she simply stigmatized all South African whites by labeling them “lower-middle-class” philistines. Sometimes, though, she conceptualized South Africa as a society comprised only of a capitalist class and the exploited poor. In this “two nations” model of class division, a

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25 See, for example, McClintock’s casual comments about “the bourgeois ideology that [Schreiner] later passionately denounced in her writings” (261).
stabilizing middle class was simply and strikingly absent. In 1892, for example, she wrote to Carpenter: “Wealth as the only possible end and aim in life, is more recognized here than, I think, in any country in the world. I don’t mean that there aren’t classes who don’t feel so in every country, but then there are other classes, here there are not. [...] There are money-making whites, and down-trodden blacks, and nothing between” (Rive 215).

The racial division in South Africa was, for Schreiner, always also a class division, and she often lumped all whites together as a vast capital-obsessed class, set over against a permanent black laboring class, with “nothing between.” This conception of the polarized class structure of South Africa permeated the essays she published in British and American journals during the 1890s, which were collected posthumously as Thoughts on South Africa (1923). In these essays, though, Schreiner’s conception of the content of South Africa’s polarized classes remained fluid. While she consistently castigated wealthy foreign speculators, who formed the bulk of the capitalist class, she wavered between seeing the indigenous lower middle class as either unwittingly collaborating with the capitalists (by supporting their political and economic policies, and sharing their profits), or as passively joining the natives as their victims. On the one hand, the “South African man, whether Dutch or English,” was like “those huge shaggy watch-dogs, which lie before their masters’ houses” (300), serving as “the mere instruments” of the capitalist class. But on the other: “The bulk of the workmen being black, and any attempt to organize or combine them being at once met with the cry ‘Black-men combining,’ the handful of skilled English workmen and townsmen are powerless” (315). Schreiner often viewed South Africa’s political fortunes as dependent on whether the indigenous English and Dutch decided to throw in their lot with the capitalist class or with the natives: describing the conflict between pro-native views and “the financial attitude,” she claimed that “the future of South Africa depends largely on the result of this struggle” (318).

While Schreiner seemed obsessed with the notion that something had gone wrong with the middle social strata, she vacillated between seeing that strata as either ubiquitous but degraded (“a whole nation of lower middle-class Philistines”) or as an absent buffer between the capitalist class and the victimized poor (whether conceived as all black, or both white and black). Both of these contradictory perspectives characterize the landscape of social class in Story of an African Farm. African society is dominated in the novel by ‘lower-middle-class philistines,’ whether in the person of the Boer landowner, Tant’ Sannie, or in the class of cynical clerks and shopkeepers Waldo encounters during his foray out of the farm. But the novel is also haunted by a mysterious evacuation of the middle ranks. No one seems able to fill the respectable middle-class position vacated, before the novel even begins, by Em’s deceased father. The social upper class is represented by two strangers—Lyndall’s and Waldo’s—whose very namelessness signifies the remoteness of this class. Aside from Gregory Rose, who seeks to deny his origins in the English yeomanry (itself a disappearing class) in favor of the elevated social pretensions of his family, the rest of the adult characters occupy distinctly “low” social positions.
Schreiner tended to see the deformation of class in South Africa not simply as a colonial problem, but as the symptom of a general crisis in European class society. She continued her account to Carpenter of "money-making whites, and down-trodden blacks, and nothing between" by observing: "And things will have to be so much worse here before they can be better; in Europe we have almost got to the bottom already and the tide is going to turn." Like Carpenter, Schreiner imagined that the turning "tide" would be a socialist one—even though her ideas about socialism were extremely vague. Yet the absence of a moderating class in South Africa seemed symptomatic of a global middle-class crisis to other, more conservative English writers as well—as Schreiner's favoring of the term "philistine" suggests. Matthew Arnold also worried that the dominance of a commercial class in South Africa, without the counterbalancing influence of a landed class, mirrored the increasing philistinization of English society, and he saw South African "philistines" as symptomatic of the global degradations wrought by a debased middle-class culture. In 1881, he wrote:

*Everywhere the attractions of this middle-class civilisation of ours, which is what we have really to offer in the way of civilisation, seem to fail of their effect. [...] Wherever we go, we put forward Murdstone and Quinion, and call their ways civilisation. [...] The English in South Africa [...] contain a wonderful proportion of attorneys, speculators, land-jobbers, and persons whose antecedents will not bear inspection. Their recent antecedents we will not meddle with, but one thing is certain: their early antecedents were those of the English middle class in general, those of Murdstone and Quinion. They have almost all, we may be very sure, passed through the halls of a Salem House and the hands of a Mr. Creakle. [...] Indeed, we are so prolific, so enterprising, so world-covering, and our middle class and its civilisation so entirely take the lead wherever we go, that there is now, one may say, a kind of odour of Salem House all round the globe. (281-82)*

Although the importance of South Africa to the British colonial imagination has not received the attention it deserves, the failures of middle-class culture that it represented for writers as politically different as Schreiner and Arnold suggest that these failures touched deep British anxieties about middle-class culture at the fin de siècle. For a complex set of reasons—including the gentrification of the middle class, the waning of evangelical authority, the emergence of distinct professional and "lower middle" classes, and, of course, the growing interpenetration of middle-class and popular culture (and, hence, "philistinization")—the social identity of the English middle class had grown increasingly incoherent after mid-century. David Cannadine has even argued that, as a result of this incoherence, the "triadic" class model itself was nearly abandoned, within both popular and political writing, in favor of a more organicist view of class hierarchy (99). Schreiner's diagnosis of a deformation in the middle ranks of South African society and her attempts to do something about it can be viewed as one version of a widespread late-century tendency to reformulate British social identities—especially middle-class ones—by rewriting them at the colonial sites at

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2 On Schreiner's socialist connections, see Ledger, *New Woman* 37-40.
which they seemed most destabilized. Schreiner was also, of course, attempting to reinvent middle-class subjectivity for political purposes unique to the South African political situation, and these twinned motivations helped give this project the special urgency it carries in her 1890s essays.

Schreiner's conviction that colonial social problems needed to be corrected by a transformation of the middle ranks is most evident in her long essay, *The Political Situation* (1896), a speech she co-wrote with her husband, which he delivered at Kimberley in 1895, and which appeared in print under both their names a year later. In *The Political Situation*, Schreiner proposed the rather fanciful project of creating from scratch a South African middle class—or, at least, transforming segments of "philistine" society into one. In this essay, Schreiner boldly—if naively—advocated the development of a progressive political class devoted to two objectives: opposing the excesses of wealthy speculators and representing the interests of the native laboring poor. The first responded to her perception that capitalist greed was ruining the country's culture and economy; the second to what she saw as the inability of black laborers to represent themselves. Resistance to the rapacity of the capitalist class, she argued, "lies with the necessarily small middle class section of the community. [...] These have not only to act for themselves, but for the entire labouring class, which, on account of its difference in race and colour from the rest of the community, cannot act for itself" (*Thoughts* 314).

In *The Political Situation*, Schreiner proposed accomplishing these classic goals of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English middle class—that is, opposing upper-class power while also managing the poor by serving as its political proxy—through several traditional middle-class strategies: progressive taxation, the enfranchisement of small property holders, and general conciliation of the (black) working classes. She also proposed classic middle-class instruments for furthering these strategies: utilization of the press for political purposes, including the purchase of a newspaper; development of political organizations; and cultivation of indigenous political leadership. Schreiner did not explicitly use the term "middle class" to define the political collectivity she hoped to bring into being. In fact, she followed another classic strategy of the traditional English middle class by promoting this emergent collectivity as a classless one. But the social coordinates she had in mind were congruent with

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27 Stoler describes this aspect of colonialist writing brilliantly.

28 Wahrman views the creation of political representations of the middle class—which he argues was an entirely new historical phenomenon in the 1790s—as a strategy of mediation between upper and lower social strata. He argues that the emphasis fell on the side of popular anti-governmentality in the 1790s and on the side of anti-popular resistance to Chartism in the 1830s, but that the rhetoric of mediation was sustained during both periods. See 59, 187.

29 These three middle-class political strategies have drawn massive amounts of commentary. A good overview remains Perkin.

30 For example, they declare: "The fundamental principle upon which Progressive Liberalism all the world over is based [...] is the axiom, however variously worded, which asserts that the mental and physical welfare and happiness of humanity as a whole is the end of all wisely directed human effort, whether of individuals or nations; that one of the aims of all
the middle economic strata—particularly since she excluded blacks, who made up nearly the entire unskilled labor force:

*I believe that in every town, and in every district and village, will be found (though not invariably among its most important or wealthy members) a certain body of men and women, from the bank clerk to the clergyman, from the shop assistant to the small tradesman, from the schoolmaster or mistress to the enterprising young farmer, Dutch or English, from the working man to the wholesale merchant, who are as essentially advanced in their view as any body of men or women in any country: persons wholly unaffected by the disease which seems eating the core of our national life—that fevered desire to grow wealthy without labour, as individuals by reckless speculation, and as a nation by annexations. (90-91)*

There are no indications that Schreiner’s tactical proposals took root, and she was not herself a political activist. The practical strategies proposed in *The Political Situation* were most likely her husband’s. But Schreiner did devote herself to the reinvention of the South African middle class throughout the 1890s—though she did so, for the most part, in more characteristically visionary ways. A central instrument in this project was her use of masochistic fantasy structures to define the nature and the virtues of colonial middle-class culture, as well as its compatibility with English national values. Following a logic of late-century writing that sought to redefine middle-class culture by projecting its ideals onto alien colonial objects, these masochistic, “middle-class” elements enter Schreiner’s writings—oddly enough—through her observations about the Boers, and the central role they might play in bringing about a reformed and coherent South African political middle.

4. The Boers as Middle-Class Regenerators

In her pro-Boer essays, Schreiner argued that the Boers and the small English middle class in South Africa would eventually merge to accomplish the twin objectives of traditional middle-class political culture: resistance to upper-class capitalism and leadership of the (disenfranchised) lower class: “If during the coming century South Africa is to be preserved from that doom which we sometimes see hovering in the dim future before her [...] it will not be through the action of Dutchmen or Englishmen alone; but of brave souls irrespective of all descent—‘God’s-Dutchman’ and ‘God’s-Englishman’—hand in hand” (*Thoughts* 319-20). Schreiner made this argument about the fusion of Boers and colonial Englishmen by defining a network of psychological and cultural values, which she claimed linked the Boers to traditional English middle-class values and, by extension, to the core of English national values as well. This network of values revolved around the same preoedipal masochistic economies—which join together martyrdom, dependence, and autonomy—on which she founded her government must be the defence of its weaker members from the degradations of the stronger, and that no course of action which bases the welfare of sections of the community on the sufferings and loss of other sections is justifiable” (*105-06).
ideals for egalitarian sexual love and feminist collective struggle. The English national values that Schreiner celebrated—identified loosely with both the English middle class in South Africa and with what she called the "ethically developed class" in England—included three fundamental qualities (Thoughts 23).

The first was a stoic willingness to endure martyrdom. The second was a capacity for self-denial or self-sacrifice, which signified the willingness of individuals to subsume themselves within principles larger than themselves—including principles of national identity and purpose. The third was a somewhat paradoxical love of "freedom" that she shrouds in the omnipotent characteristics of an absolute. Read psychologically, these three elements fuse polarized conditions of dependence and autonomy through the vehicle of actively sought pain and suffering.

While Schreiner often complained of the widespread evils of English greed, for example, she claimed that in the English "ethically developed class" there existed a powerful counteractive to such greed. She repeatedly praised the capacity of this class for martyrdom: "If no nation has more misrepresented, neglected and persecuted its sons of light, no nation has had more of them to persecute" (Thoughts 23). Rather than formulating their virtues positively, she posited them as the antithesis of self-interest: "those very vices which most mark our national character and by which we are known throughout the earth, are the very qualities of which our greatest men and our noblest elements are the negation." She often allied this negative power with the self-sacrificial spirit that defines the English national character: "there is in some corner of the best English natures a curious power for sacrificing all for humanity, a curious power of obliterating selfish interests, that is rare, rare indeed" (Rive 384).

But Schreiner's self-sacrificing English martyrs were also characterized—in a paradox that lies at the heart of masochistic omnipotent fantasy—by their devotion to freedom and autonomy. Schreiner repeatedly glorified English independence as the essence of the national character. She also consistently tied this love of independence back again to self-sacrifice, thus completing the masochistic circuit of exchange between self-sacrifice and omnipotence. In Schreiner's view, what differentiated the English love of freedom from the aggressive capitalist South African class was the determination of the English to undermine their own world domination by spreading freedom to everyone: "we love freedom not only for ourselves, but we desire with a burning passion to spread it broadcast over the earth. [...] This I hold is the one great gift which England and England alone possesses; this is the quality which makes us unique among the nations of the earth; this is the gift which we have to contribute to the great common offertory of humanity" (Thoughts 343). Schreiner denied that she supported "John Bull" mastery of the world; but she did maintain a paternalistic vision of world domination by imagining British ideals of freedom as the paradoxical union of omnipotent power with self-extinction: "We believe that our desire to impart [freedom] is a more potent means of extending our true empire [...] than any mere strength of arm or valour in slaughtering, [...] [In] that large united people of the future every man will say: 'In that I am free I am English'" (Thoughts 354).
In her many essays and pamphlets written in defense of the Boers’ national character, Schreiner used a similar kind of masochistic economy to define Boer culture. She established this correlation in two stages: first, by describing the Boers as the childlike victims of a neglectful, abandoning, even sadistic mother-country, victims who yet desire nothing better than to have England recognize and welcome their filial dependence; and, second, by describing Boer psychology in terms of a masochistic self-sufficiency that counters national abandonment through self-martyring virtues, virtues which parallel those of the puritan tradition of the English middle class. In the first stage of this strategy, Schreiner consistently described the conflict between Britons and Boers within an extended metaphor of mother/child relations, in which England figures as the neglectful, unempathic, even sadistic mother. In *The South African Question* (1899), Schreiner repeatedly called England the “step-mother” of the Boers, but a step-mother incapacitated by that quintessentially English trait, “a certain shell of hard reserve” (23), which made it difficult for her to feel empathy: “We do not readily understand wants and conditions distinct from our own” (23-24). As a result, England has become an abandoning, even a sadistic parent, “[putting] our foot on the weak” (21). Schreiner described English aggression against the Boers as the equivalent of “the mother’s drawing a sword and planting it in the heart of the daughter” (100).

Schreiner clung to this trope of England as bad mother to the persecuted Boers throughout the 1890s, though she professed a hope that the tie between mother and child might be repaired, as well as a certainty that such reconciliation would be welcomed by the dependent Boers. In “The South African Nation” (1900), she cajoled Britain into becoming a step-mother “not favouring those of her own blood unduly, but seeking to aid those in her power,” who is then “rewarded by a love and devotion from the children not her own yet greater than that which is often given to a mother by the children of the blood” (*Thoughts* 380). She spoke warmly of the Boers’ need for love, and their “large and generous response to affection and sympathy” (*Question* 25), often flying in the face of historical reality by affirming their “deep and sincere affection […] for England” (40). She also adopted a maternal, infantilizing tone toward the Boers herself, often referring to the Transvaal as that “gallant little Republic” (*Question* 31) and to the Boer dialect, the Taal, as their “little language” (*Question* 26).

Schreiner’s propagandistic history of the Boers in South Africa reinforced this theme of national abandonment by making England’s aggression seem to be the last in a long series of European “parental” abandonments. In an essay on the settlement of South Africa, “The Boer” (1896), she gave extraordinary prominence to historical events that foregrounded these preoedipal themes. For example, she dwelt at length on the settlement of Huguenot refugees in South Africa in 1687, claiming that these religious martyrs reinforced the isolation of South African culture because of their profound alienation from their “mother land” (*Thoughts* 76). Schreiner viewed Huguenot disaffection from the “mother land” as more extreme even than that of the American Puritans, given that, in her view, the Puritans were persecuted not by all of England but only by an unrepresentative government: “It was not England and its people who expelled them, but a
step-motherly Government. Therefore they founded ‘New England’ and clung to the old” (Thoughts 82). Schreiner also dwelt on the spirit of martyrdom these Huguenots infused into the Boer race. Describing the Huguenots as “winnowed by the unerring flail of religious persecution,” she saw them as “the finest element that has ever been added to the population of South Africa” (Thoughts 33). In “The Boer,” these Huguenots represent “that golden minority which is so remorselessly winnowed from the dross of the conforming majority by all forms of persecution directed against intellectual and spiritual independence” (Thoughts 75).

In addition to stressing the centrality of the Huguenots in Boer history and national character, Schreiner also dwelt in “The Boer” on the orphaned girls from the Netherlands who were shipped to South Africa as potential wives, beginning in the late seventeenth century, to redress the disproportionate ratio of male to female colonists. “Alone in the world, without relatives who had cared sufficiently for them to save them from the hard mercy of a public asylum, these women must have carried away few of the warm and tender memories happier women bear to plant in the hearts of their children” (Thoughts 73). These “early mothers of the Boer race,” who were “numerous in proportion to the whole stock from which the race rose,“ deepened the Boers’ isolation from their European origins by themselves reinforcing the sense of national abandonment. English colonists “still call Europe ‘home,’” but “this bond, light as air, yet strong as iron, those early mothers of the Boer race could hardly have woven between the hearts of their children and the country they come from” (Thoughts 72-73).

In the second stage of Schreiner’s correlation of Boer culture with traditional middle-class English culture, she linked the Boers’ history of persecution to the self-sufficiency that masochistic fantasy always associates with martyrdom. Schreiner repeatedly affirmed the Boers’ stoic acceptance of their suffering and privation as the source of their spirit of “indomitable resolution” (Thoughts 19). Speaking of the Huguenots and their legacy, she affirmed “that law deep-lying in the nature of things, which has ordained that where men shall be found having the force to stand alone, and suffer for abstract conviction, there also shall be found the individuality, virility and power which founds great peoples and marks dominant races” (Thoughts 75). Among these powers of “virile” self-sufficiency was what she called the Boers’ “unlimited power of self-control” (Thoughts 19). Coupled with this self-control was the out-sized courage that sprang from their willingness to endure martyrdom. Arguing that the Boers would make formidable adversaries should England go to war with them, Schreiner described them as possessing the extraordinary courage of victims and martyrs: “the courage of the woman robbed of her infant, who climbs where no other human foot dare tread and recovers it from the eagle’s eyrie [...] the courage of the peasant woman, who, after being broken three times on the wheel, on being asked to give up the names of her confederates, already almost past speech, shook her head in refusal, is again put on the wheel, and dies” (Thoughts 250).

Schreiner’s various attempts to swaddle the Boers in masochistic fantasy—through her history of Boer martyrdom; her portrait of the Boers as
abandoned children eager to renew their dependence on a cruel motherland; her linking of Boer self-denial and self-sacrifice with Boer self-sufficiency—all worked to construct the Boers in the image of a traditional English middle class, with strong parallels to the self-denying spiritualism and self-sufficiency of the evangelical middle classes of the early nineteenth century. The clearest sign of this class parallel can be found, perhaps, in Schreiner’s willful reformulation of Boer Calvinism in evangelical terms. Schreiner insisted that the Boers were not dogmatic in their faith and that they did not depend, as Calvinists generally did, on religious authorities: “it is wonderful how very little real dogmatic theology the true primitive up-country Boer has!” (Thoughts 289-90). Instead, she claimed to see the evangelical qualities of their faith: their devotion to Bible reading; the affective power of their religiosity; and their emphasis on personal communion with God, which she saw them achieving through a mystical link with nature (a claim that clearly draws on her own version of Spencerian natural mysticism). The Boer “has always open before him the book from which the bibles were transcribed [...] that which religious minds in all centuries and of all races have sought after, has been strangely forced on the African Boer by his silent solitary life amid vast man-unmodified aspects of nature” (Thoughts 289-90). Schreiner took enormous pains to transform the Boers’ Calvinist heritage into something quaintly compatible with residual British middle-class values, claiming that the Boer faith “differs in no way from that still professed by the majority of Scotchmen, from the Aberdeen grocer to the Edinburgh professor” (Thoughts 285).

Rather perversely, since the Boers were universally reviled in England as intractably vulgar, Schreiner presented them not simply as compatible with traditional middle-class values, but as a force for their regeneration. Imagining the Boers as an anti-modern culture grounded in primitive sources of spiritual and psychological vitality—a vitality flowing from masochistic conjunctions of self-sacrifice and omnipotence—Schreiner saw in them the psychological energies that might energize a new middle-class English colonial culture. These energies consisted, primarily, of the Boer’s radical anti-materialism, which for Schreiner was a sign of capacities for suffering and self-sacrifice, and of their devotion to individual freedom, which she believed constituted a foundational source of English social power that England itself was in danger of losing: “This absolute freedom and independence [...] was not peculiar to those northern races who conquered and peopled England. [...] It has lived on in our brothers, the Dutch and French, and thus turns up again in their descendant, the African Boer” (Thoughts 341). In return, Schreiner imagined English culture refining these two tendencies—asceticism and independence—into that world-liberating bestowal of English “freedom” to all peoples mentioned above: “we bring to the Boer the doctrine of a higher humanity” (Thoughts 328).

Whether or not Schreiner really believed her own propagandistic arguments that the Boers could become the core of a South African middle class, their usefulness within her general attempt to reform middle-class culture extended beyond the political and social realities of South Africa. For Schreiner directed her essays of the 1890s at the middle class in England, where most of these essays
were first published and where she hoped they would have an impact on domestic middle-class culture, as well as forestall the Boer War (1899-1902). Like most pro-Boers, Schreiner mounted arguments calculated to swing the English middle class against the war, in part because it was the class most intensely divided by it. Recent historians generally agree that the English middle class was exclusively responsible for the pro-Boer movement, while at the same time it seems to have been the source of the most rabid jingoism. Certainly, the leadership of the violent jingo crowds was middle-class (Blanch 220). Most nonconformist clergy were pro-war, too, as was the institutional church. The lower middle class was probably the strongest and most unified source of support for the war, which helped make the struggle over middle-class opinion all the more urgent. As Paula Krebs has observed, the sensationalism of the popular press tended to fuse both lower-middle-class and working-class enthusiasm for the war (11-12).3 But it was in the middle class that divisions of opinion hit hardest, as can be measured in the number of middle-class families that suffered serious rifts—families like W.H. Lecky’s, or Arthur Conan Doyle’s, for instance, or, for that matter, Olive Schreiner’s own family (her husband and her brother Will campaigned publicly against the war, while her brother Theo toured England campaigning for it).4 What working-class resistance to the war did emerge revolved not around the moral arguments made by pro-Boers like Schreiner; rather, working-class resistance to the war, such as it was, centered on the distracting effects the war might have on domestic social reform and the deleterious effects it might have on prices and wages (Price 233-35).5 The failure of the pro-Boers to capture working-class opinion has been consistently attributed to the deeply moral nature of pro-Boer appeals, which was determined largely by their preoccupation with middle-class spheres of debate (Gooch xv-xvi). Schreiner’s images of the Boers’ voluntary suffering and martyrdom, which resonated both with traditional evangelical middle-class discourse and with the dynamics of preoedipal masochistic fantasy, thus formed part of an extensive rhetorical war for English middle-class opinions and values.

Unlike her commitments to feminist struggle, Schreiner’s attempt to reinvent a middle-class political subject in South Africa gave way, in the early twentieth century, to other causes. Nevertheless, this political project of the 1890s profoundly shaped her attitudes toward racial difference in South Africa, in ways that have not been fully appreciated. Schreiner’s hopes for the empowerment of the political middle were largely responsible for her well-known consignment of native Africans to the category of a permanent laboring class. They also anchored her sympathies for the political fortunes of the Boers, which were not based solely on the Boers’ racial whiteness, as some have argued, but also on her ability

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3 On lower middle-class jingoism, see also Blanch 235.
4 On splits in middle-class families, see Spies. Davey also argues that the middle class was the most divided by the war (121-22).
5 Porter argues that while Labour politicians and the labor press spoke against the war, they never actively joined the movement against it (244). Blanch claims that unskilled workers tended to favor the war, and it was only in the ranks of skilled laborers that muted opposition might be found (224).
to idealize their class character as a source of political resistance to capitalism.\footnote{Krebs argues that Schreiner conceptualized the Boers in racial terms and native South Africans in class terms. While this formula does usefully address the intersections of class and racial discourses in Schreiner’s work, it remains too neat a distinction and overlooks Schreiner’s hopes for the Boers as the potential core of a new South African middle class.} This vision was itself a form of omnipotent fantasy, since Schreiner’s advocacy of the Boers involved willful distortions of South African history and cultures and drew on her own willingness to martyr herself for their cause. Yet its failures offer an instructive contrast to her ideals for sexual equality and feminist struggle, which were driven by the same preoedipal masochistic energies, and which emanated, in part, from the same desire to reinvent a middle-class political subject.

5. Conclusion: Converging Masochisms and Critical Disavowal

To bring the argument of this essay full circle: Schreiner’s assessment of the decline of British society in Woman and Labor (much of which was written during the Boer War and thus at the time of her preoccupation with South African class crisis) focused specifically on the degeneration of middle-class Englishwomen. Schreiner’s attempts to reimagine Boer culture as the foundation for a South African middle class grew out of and folded back into similar concerns in Woman and Labor and in her other early twentieth-century feminist work, which sought, not simply to recast sexual relations in egalitarian terms, but to do so in the context of a general rehabilitation of middle-class women. In particular, the masochistic psychological economies we have seen operating in Schreiner’s feminist writings carry certain class inflections that can help us understand the self-sacrificial qualities of New Woman feminism not simply as a strategy of gender politics, but as the correlative of widespread fin-de-siècle efforts to reinvent and redeploy middle-class subjectivity.

In Woman and Labor, Schreiner claimed that an unprecedented world crisis had resulted from the spread of “parasitism” to the middle-class female: “it is now possible not only for a small and wealthy section of women in each civilized community to be maintained without performing any of the ancient, crude, physical labors of their sex [...] but this condition has already been reached, or is tending to be reached, by that large mass of women in civilized societies who form the intermediate class between poor and rich” (114-15). Though Schreiner was concerned with the idleness of women of all classes, the historical crisis of the moment seemed to her to be caused by the erosion of the middle-class woman’s character: “It is not uncommon in modern societies to find women of a class relatively very moderately wealthy, the wives and daughters of shopkeepers or professional men, who, if their male relations will supply them with a very limited amount of money without exertion on their part, will become as completely parasitic and useless as women with untold wealth at their command” (101). Schreiner believed that, because of the current spread of “parasitism” to middle-class women, in forty or fifty years’ time, the conditions of idleness would affect women of all ranks—at which point the future of the entire human
race, and not that of just the British Empire, would be at stake: we "stand therefore in a position the gravity and importance of which was not equaled by that of any of our forerunners in the ancient civilization" (117).

The logic of middle-class renovation and the masochistic strategies upon which it seemed to depend kept Schreiner from recognizing the relevance of the women's movement to working-class women. Her concerns with the dangers of middle-class self-indulgence and with women's need to return to "primitive" conditions of female martyrdom through labor also help explain her indifference to the oppression of native South African women in her 1890s writings (though she did champion African women's rights in 1907, when she resigned from the Women's Enfranchisement League to protest their exclusion, at a time when racial politics had acquired for her a new urgency). The dynamics of masochistic fantasy and the middle-class political renovation it seemed to promise led Schreiner throughout the 1890s to idealize Boer and African women as stoic sufferers, rather than to promote their civil rights, which were, for her, always a secondary feminist concern in any case. She once addressed Boer women: "'Tante', we, the newest of new women, stretch out our hands to you, the oldest of the old [...] we pray of you, stay where you are, and hold fast by what you have, till we come and meet you. We are coming to you in our own way" (Thoughts 270). She also infamously idealized the suffering of African women at the beginning of Woman and Labor, when she described a "Kafir" woman who expressed women's suffering "with a passion and intensity I have not known equaled," but who spoke "not one word of bitterness against the individual man, nor any will or intention to revolt; rather, there was a stern and almost majestic attitude of acceptance" (6). Schreiner took such stern majesty to represent the cross-racial essence of masochistic power. The eradication of real historical and cultural differences that resulted cannot be explained by Schreiner's endorsement of racist eugenic or evolutionary discourses; rather, it followed from the central role played by masochism throughout her work and from the preoedipal dynamics that unite and energize all her political writing, including her attempt to revision the middle class, redeploying ideological materials from its moral and political past (both real and imagined) as the basis for an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-patriarchal culture.

It is in the context of Schreiner's pan-racial idealizations of female martyrdom that we need to appreciate the complexity (as well as the limits) of her colonial politics. Schreiner was not simply reproducing a middle-class female discourse that "othered" non-white women; she was actively revising middle-class subjectivity—though this project certainly did (mis)represent non-whites either as an ideal standard of suffering to which middle-class subjects might aspire, or as moral compatriots they might manage. Schreiner's fin-de-siècle masochism did, in fact, channel the power of preoedipal fantasy into socially transformative political tactics, even though its utopianism was inevitably entangled in the distortions and displacements of omnipotent delusion. But the mobility of masochistic fantasy across lines of gender, class, and race also explains Schreiner's quickness to identify with African women in the early twentieth century, when she vigorously championed native equality in the context of South African suffragism.
Schreiner's abrupt alliance with African women against her former white middle-class allies might stand as a warning to contemporary critics who cast the Schreiner of the 1890s as a racial victimizer and who thus follow her into sadomasochistic scripts that extract self-righteous power from the position of the victim, that absolutize oppositions between mastery and submission, and that blur inconvenient conceptual or social distinctions in the process. What remains constant in Schreiner's political evolution is her logic of masochistic identification. But the conjunctions of suffering and self-sufficiency upon which its omnipotent phantasmagorics depended were extremely fluid. They served more psychological and political purposes than can be captured by any alignment of her work with discourses of simple dominance or submission, or by any confinement of that work within the boundaries of a single social field.

As Jacqueline Rose reminds us, only a recognition of the unconscious fantasy structures that underlie all political idealisms—which always weave elements of the perverse into such idealism—can help us ward off the reductive tendencies of our own critical politics. As I hope I have shown, contemporary critics need to engage the full political dynamics of fin-de-siècle feminist masochism—including its attempts to renovate bourgeois culture at colonial peripheries—before hastening to indict its complications with racism and imperialism. To flog Schreiner for her treatment of race is to refuse to take stock of why the victims of racism might be so important to contemporary feminist critique—a refusal that not only disavows the historical centrality of masochism in feminist politics, but that also reproduces the preoedipal dynamics at the heart of the feminist tradition by grounding contemporary fantasies of moral and political omnipotence on a displaced identification with feminism's alleged victims.

Works Cited


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Rose argues that we need "an account of justice" that includes its "perverse component" to counter political idealisms that deny and displace their own unconscious energies (92).


