Sadomasochism and the Magical Group:  
Kipling’s Middle-Class Imperialism

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There we met with famous men
Set in office o’er us;
And they beat on us with rods—
Faithfully with many rods—
Daily beat us on with rods,
For the love they bore us.
—from “A School Song,” Prelude to Stalky & Co. (1899)

Recent Kipling criticism always begins by addressing his political multivalence.¹ The most redemptive leftist readings have tried to valorize this multivalence as a form of cultural hybridity, casting Kipling as an avatar of Homi Bhabha.² More commonly, readers inscribe such multivalence within the inevitable contradictions of colonial experience, weighting Kipling’s competing loyalties to British imperialism and to resisting colonial subjects in a great variety of ways.³ However the balance is adjusted, though, the debate about Kipling’s politics has been almost exclusively conducted in terms of race.⁴ It has entirely neglected the realm of social class, where another kind of multivalence has been abandoned to diehard rehabilitators of Kipling’s reputation. Christopher Hitchens, for example, in a recent Atlantic Monthly essay, lauds Kipling’s “fruitful contradictions” (103) as the source of his transcendence of class divisions: “[H]is entire success as a bard derived from the ability to shift between Low and High Church, so to speak. He was a hit with the troops and the gallery . . . [b]ut he was also . . . the chosen poet of the royal family and the Times” (96). Andrew Rutherford used the phenomenon of Kipling’s supposed cross-class appeal to similar effect in his “General Introduction” to the 1987 Oxford World’s Classics editions—the first modern editions to appear after the lapse of copyright. Rutherford warned readers to suspend their biases against Kipling’s jingoism, and not to dismiss him “contemptuously” or “hysterically”: “Here, after all, we have the last
English author to appeal to readers of all social classes and all cultural groups, from lowbrow to highbrow, and the last poet to command a mass audience” (vii–viii).

Praise for Kipling’s fluid relationship to class boundaries is usually meant to deflect attention from his less politically palatable tendencies. But those who simply ignore this aspect of his work miss a significant part of his ideological impact. Over forty years ago, Noel Annan famously proposed that Kipling’s primary cultural importance lay not in his attitudes toward imperialism, but in his innovations as a sociologist. Annan regarded Kipling as “the sole analogue in England to those continental sociologists—Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto—who revolutionized the study of society at the beginning of this century” (323–24). He claimed that, like the new continental sociologists, Kipling “saw society as a nexus of groups,” and believed that “the patterns of behaviour which these groups unwittingly established, rather than men’s wills or anything so vague as a class, cultural or national tradition, primarily determined men’s actions” (326).

The thesis of this essay is that Kipling did, indeed, locate social determination within a “nexus of groups”; but that he organized such groups around a sadomasochistic psychological and cultural logic rather than around the more benign, informal modes of social order and control Annan claimed to find in his work. I will also argue—pace Hitchens and Rutherford—that Kipling’s sadomasochistic groups underwrote a remarkably unilateral class politics, which accommodated contradictory attitudes toward imperialism within an integrated psycho-social vision of middle-class authority. Rather than eroding social hierarchy, Kipling’s multivalent imperialism absolutely depended upon it. If it has been difficult for critics to recognize the class politics underlying Kipling’s writings about empire, his manipulation of the socially mobile characteristics of sadomasochistic groups has played an important role in camouflaging those politics.

Readers have long been aware of Kipling’s overt sadomasochistic preoccupations: the bullyings, beatings, and cruelty that pervade his work. For several generations, it was around his enthusiastic treatment of brutality—more so than his jingoism—that critical debate pivoted. But our recent concentration on questions of race has largely cast this subject into the shade—in part, because cross-racial sadomasochism usually signaled Kipling’s unqualified retreat from the kinds of complex engagement with native “others” that have preoccu-
pied recent criticism. Instances of cross-racial sadomasochism in
Kipling often simply express his belligerent, one-sided militarism—
either his condemnations of native savagery, or his glorifications of
British military butchery. Or, if cross-racial cruelty had a sexual dimen-
sion, it compelled stiff refusals, like the famous moral lesson drawn by
the narrator of “Beyond the Pale” (1888), a story about the cruel
punishments dispensed by Hindus to cross-racial lovers: “A man should,
whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race, and breed. Let the White
go to the White and the Black to the Black” (Plain 127). While
Kipling’s work may have incorporated certain kinds of racial and
cultural exchange, it could only safely explore the complexities of sadomasochism within the field of British class relations, and the imperial
order those relations sustained.7

My claims about the centrality of sadomasochism to Kipling’s
class politics are intended to reinforce the contentions of David Cannadine, Ann Stoler, and other recent scholars of colonial culture: that
time was a crucial site for extending and redefining British domestic
social structures, by projecting those structures to the colonial
periphery and back again.8 As Cannadine reminds us: “The British
Empire has been extensively studied as a complex racial hierarchy (and
also as a less complex gender hierarchy); but it has received far less atten-
tion as an equally complex social hierarchy or, indeed, as a social
organism, or construct, of any kind” (9). Combining psychoanalytic
and historicist methods, I will argue that Kipling rewrote social hierar-
chy on imperial terrain by merging the sadomasochistic logic of what
I will call “magical groups” with both professional and evangelical
values. By doing so, he synthesized the ideological languages of distinct
metropolitan middle-class constituencies, while also managing their
ambivalent attitudes toward imperial authority. This synthesis enabled
Kipling to displace conservative Tory models of power with a newly inte-
grated (if somewhat mythical) middle-class one, which ultimately
helped to broaden and solidify the social base of support for British
imperialism. I will concentrate on Kipling’s writings about India from
the late 1880s up to the turn of the century, but I must begin with an
extended discussion of Stalky & Co. (1899)—a collection of stories that
clearly articulates the sadomasochistic logic underlying Kipling’s work,
while promoting an education in that logic as the best preparation for
middle-class colonial leaders.
I. Sadomasochistic Omnipotence in *Stalky & Co.*

Though set in a school whose mission was to train officers’ sons for colonial service—modeled on the United Services College, which Kipling attended from 1878 to 1882—*Stalky & Co.* has usually been read as an exposé of the institutionalized brutality often discreetly overlooked by nineteenth-century public school fiction. The three boys that comprise Stalky’s gang—Stalky (whose given name in the stories is Corkran), M’Turk, and Beetle (the figure based on Kipling)—spend all their time avenging themselves on cruel and unjust schoolboys and house-masters. As the majority of Kipling’s critics have noted, however—often to their distress, or their outrage—the stories absolutely revel in bullying. If they expose anything, it is often only “bad” bullying—that is, bullying by those weak in intelligence or ineffective in their abuse of power.

In contrast, the “good” bullying that *Stalky & Co.* seems to endorse confirms one of the consistent insights of relational psychoanalysis: that sadomasochism is best understood as an intersubjective dynamic. Following in the footsteps of 1890s sexology, and working by the light of the drive model, Sigmund Freud defined sadomasochism in rigidly sexual terms, launching an analytic tradition that has confined post-Freudian, Lacanian, and post-structuralist discussions of sadomasochism—as well as popular ones—to questions of sexual domination and submission. But relational theorists, who claim that sexual dysfunctions characterize only a small minority of the patients they would describe as sadomasochistic, have turned instead to intersubjective models in which the primary role is played by narcissistic fantasy. These models have the potential to enrich cultural analysis by expanding our sense of how sadomasochism might organize both individual and collective processes of identity formation. While the clinical literature on sadomasochism is vast, most relational theorists would now define it as a response to narcissistic injury that generates compensatory fantasies of omnipotence. Those omnipotent fantasies transform the very conditions of narcissistic trauma—abandonment, neglect, abuse—into signs of their opposite: that is, of magical abilities to command unlimited love and power. Such fantasies can inhabit both individuals and groups in a variety of ways. But one indication that Kipling approved the particular way they inhabit Stalky’s gang lies in the reverence with which the gang regards the school’s Head, whose bullying despotism seems the quintes-
sence of this kind of narcissistic omnipotence—which makes it a good place to begin observing the logic of sadomasochistic megalomania that, later in this essay, I will trace in Kipling’s writings about collective forms of social authority in India.

The story “In Ambush” (1898), for example, features an emblematic encounter between Stalky’s gang and the Head that glamorizes the latter’s boundless power to punish. The story begins when the gang entraps the most bullying of the house-masters, a man appropriately named “King.” First, the boys lure King into trying to catch them trespassing, only to maneuver him into trespassing himself—which earns him a “dressing down” (46) from a domineering local landowner, Colonel Dabney. Then they trick him into accusing them of both trespassing and drunkenness (they conceal the fact that Colonel Dabney had given them permission to cross his land, and they fake drunkenness before one of King’s schoolboy informants). Threatened by King with a beating for these offenses, the boys formally appeal to the Head. This step is their legal right, one they have carefully plotted to embarrass King, and to flaunt their own “injured innocence” (46). Sure of their ground, the conniving boys share a victory feast before presenting themselves to the Head. But, to their surprise, the Head simply “[flings] the written charges into the wastepaper basket” and declares:

I think we understand one another perfectly. . . . I know you went to Colonel Dabney’s covers because you were invited. . . . I am convinced that, on this occasion, you have adhered strictly to the truth. I know, too, that you were not drinking. . . . There is not a flaw in any of your characters. And that is why I am going to perpetrate a howling injustice. . . . I’m going to lick you. (52)

In what sense this punishment can be called “unjust” is left open: on the one hand, the boys’ mischievous pranks make them seem to deserve punishment of some kind; on the other hand, the Head indicates in various ways that he is more displeased by his ineffectual house-masters than by the three boys, for whom he feels both respect and affinity. But the Head’s beatings end all discussion of moral complexity with authoritarian violence—which is not merely symbolic, but quite real: the Head’s beatings are known as “executions” (52), a term that conveys his absolute authority as well as his sadistic cruelty. As the boys examine their welts on one occasion, we are told that “there was not a penny to
choose between any of them for thoroughness, efficiency, and a certain clarity of outline that stamps the work of the artist” (117).

Numerous times, the stories repeat this drama of “injustice” between the three boys and the Head. Technically innocent, having made their house-masters’ futile attempts to punish them expose the masters’ own ill temper and bad judgment, and having gotten away with acts of vengeance that cannot be proved against them (or are not even suspected), the boys appear before the Head only to reach the limit of their ability to frustrate the figure of the bully—and thus to assert their own bullying power. That limit is precisely the omnipotent capacity of the bully to hold himself beyond all appeals to fairness or mercy:

What they felt most was his unfairness in stopping to talk between executions. Thus: “Among the—lower classes this would lay me open to a charge of—assault. You should be more grateful for your—privileges than you are. There is a limit—one finds it by experience, Beetle—beyond which it is never safe to pursue private vendettas, because—don’t move—sooner or later one comes into collision with the—higher authority, who has studied the animal.” (117)

The gang remains perplexed by the admiration they feel for this tyrant—admiration that sometimes rises to the pitch of adoring love. “But look here,” says Beetle, “Why aren’t we wrathy with the Head? He said it was a flagrant injustice. So it is!” (118). If Beetle cannot answer his own question, the Head at least is aware that, as he tells them during one beating, there is “a certain flagrant injustice about this that ought to appeal to—to your temperament” (52). The stories themselves make it clear that the Head’s despotism satisfies the emotional needs of sadomasochistic schoolboys by sustaining omnipotent fantasy in a variety of ways.

First, the Head allows the boys to identify themselves with omnipotence by demonstrating its apparent reality. The Head’s autocratic authority stands in stark contrast to the weakness of the masters, whose human foibles the gang systematically exposes. The master discovered to have a fear of rats has rats shoved into his room through the chimney; the paranoiac master is diverted from cracking down on Stalky’s gang by having his paranoia refocused on other boys in his house. Against this backdrop of bumbling and exploitable authority, the Head’s despotism demonstrates to the boys what unassailable omnipotence might look like. As Steven Marcus has put it: the Head represents “an authority which can be believed in. . . . We may think of him as a surrogate for God. . . . Whether he or anyone could ever actu-
ally embody such qualities and powers is not immediately to the point; what matters is that the boys believe he does” (157). Modeling their bullying on the Head’s, then, the boys share his apparent omnipotence to the extent that they can imitate or extend his godlike, punitive power. In “The Moral Reformers” (1899), the chaplain actually commissions Stalky’s gang—for the good of the whole school—to punish two bullies, Campbell and Sefton, who had been abusing one of the younger boys. When Stalky’s gang ties up the two bullies and beats them to the point of unconsciousness, their style of execution (which is carried out “swiftly and scientifically” [128]) links them to the Head, and their taunts identify them with the school as an institution:

Now we’re going to show you what real bullyin’ is. What I don’t like about you, Sefton, is, you come to the Coll. with your stick-up collars an’ patent-leather boots, an’ you think you can teach us something about bullying. Do you think you can teach us anything about bullying? . . . Now this is bullyin’. (130)

The collusion of the school authorities with Stalky’s gang in “good” bullying horrified many contemporary readers, and has forced recent apologists to strain at explanations. Many critics have followed Marcus in trying to see the Head as a figure who models codes of honor, justice, and loyalty that could not be presented straightforwardly in an age that had turned morality into cant, but had to be asserted instead “by standing these terms on their heads” (159). But such tortuous attempts to moralize the Head’s tyranny obscure the complex dynamics of identification and vicarious empowerment that sadomasochism makes possible through omnipotent fantasy.

Second, the Head’s despotism allows the boys to indulge their needs for dependence on an omnipotent figure (no matter how hurtful such dependence might sometimes be). The Head’s limitless capacity for punishment is also a sign of his potential for limitless understanding. Unlike the house-masters, the Head knows and sees all. Echoing the Head himself, the chaplain tells Stalky’s gang: “He understands you perfectly” (119). An alumnus of the school exclaims: “Is there one single dam’ thing about us that you don’t know?” (257). This omniscient comprehension—even if it guarantees inescapable punishment—also suggests that the Head might possess an omnipotent capacity for empathy. In sadomasochistic fantasy, the omnipotent bully is always potentially an omnipotent rescuer, in the sense that victims of abuse often wish to see in the abuser at least the possibility of infinitely
sympathetic understanding. As relational work has shown, an abusive parent’s seeming omnipotence is often idealized by abused children as a potential source of redemptive love, if only as the object of a magical wish—that is, the child’s omnipotent fantasy of triumphing over the abuser by transforming infinitely abusive attention into infinitely loving attention. In addition, submission to abuse protects the abuser’s omnipotence from the victim’s own repressed rage and aggression, thus preserving the abuser in fantasy as an omnipotent figure strong enough to offer the prospect of safety and protection. Readers have debated whether, on particular occasions, the Head is “really” kind or not to his charges. The Head himself certainly claims to be—he responds to the alumnus’s exclamation by saying: “We-ell! It’s a shameful confession, but, you see, I loved you all” (257). The important point, however, is that the Head’s nurturing qualities, whenever he does unveil them, are deeply invested with qualities of omnipotence, which is precisely what makes them the object of schoolboy fascination and love.

Third and perhaps most important, the Head’s despotism enables the boys to construe punishment as a narcissistic sign of their specialness, and of a kind of collaboration that shares omnipotence magically between abuser and abused. Within the logic of omnipotent fantasy, the victim of punishment magically controls the punishment by imagining it as having been done for his or her benefit. When Stalky’s gang discusses the Head’s beatings with the chaplain, he tells them: “One licking once a week would do you an immense amount of good” (119). The knowledge (or the fantasy) that one’s beating is done for one’s own good can constitute a secret, magical bond between omnipotent authority and dependent child. Freud made this point in “A Child Is Being Beaten” (1919), when he claimed that the second stage of the beating fantasy transforms the father’s punishments into a fulfillment of the wish: “My father loves only me” (17: 187). The Head himself often conveys signs of special favor in the course of his abuse: “I am now going to pay you a tremendous compliment,” he says before one beating; “I’m going to execute you without rhyme, Beetle, or reason” (187).

But the special favor the Head confers through punishment is, quite simply, the education in sadomasochistic omnipotence he provides. Kipling does not suggest that the Head is some kind of stereotypically sentimental figure hiding behind a gruff exterior. Quite the
contrary, *Stalky & Co.* makes it clear that a training in sadomasochism, and the omnipotent narcissism that it engenders, is, in fact, the most important, most unsentimental gift that the Head bestows. One lesson the beatings teach, for example, is the value of transcending one’s emotions—itself a form of omnipotent fantasy. Masochists often harbor delusions of absolute self-sufficiency through the omnipotent belief that they can stop having feelings, can transcend pain absolutely, and can maintain themselves in splendid narcissistic isolation.18 *Stalky & Co.* thus exposes the sadomasochistic logic beneath those British codes of masculinity that mandated displays of one’s indifference to suffering. Another lesson the Head imparts through his beatings is that life is, in essence, relentlessly cruel and unjust, and that one must respond to it with narcissistic compensations rather than with futile protests.19 As Stalky says to Beetle: “You’ve been here six years, and you expect fairness. Well, you are a dithering idiot” (75). The boys practice these forms of emotional transcendence in their regular beatings of one another, which are always perpetrated “dispassionately” (56). The narrator calls our attention repeatedly to this reciprocal abuse, and to its enigmatic emotional neutrality: “Corkran kicked [M’Turk] as he had kicked Beetle; and even as Beetle, M’Turk took not the faintest notice” (13).20 The normalization of reciprocal beating within Stalky’s gang signifies the immunity its members feel from either giving or receiving real injury, no matter how badly they do, in fact, abuse one another. Internalizing omnipotent narcissism by acting out dramas of despotism, submission, and injustice within its own ranks, the group performs its magical imperviousness to pain as a sign of its power, and of the absolute impregnability of its bonds of attachment.

Critics have long contended that Stalky—who eventually becomes a war hero—exemplifies the imperialist’s need to have followers and admirers of his godlike authority.21 But bullying omnipotence is an interpersonal as well as a subjective phenomenon. There has been considerable psychoanalytic work done recently on the means by which bullying binds social groups together—particularly in the wake of disturbing patterns of violence in middle-class American schools.22 Some researchers have focused on the ways bullying groups repair narcissistic injuries for their members by allowing unintegrated or unstable positive aspects of identity—like those produced by omnipotent fantasy—to be projected onto and consolidated in the group.23 Recent studies have also recognized that bullying groups depend on
triangular relationships, in which bully and victim interact with a third figure, the bystander, to form a complex social bond.

II. The Bystander and the Magical Group

The bystander plays a critical role within bullying groups in at least two ways. First, the bystander normalizes sadomasochistic relationships as the basis for public, shared identity. Second, the bystander embodies the reversible identifications that bind bully and victim together. Researchers have discovered that those who watch scenes of bullying passively tend to identify with both bully and victim. The passivity of the bystander acts as a defense against his or her own sadism, sublimating it as voyeurism. But the passivity of the bystander also repeats in its very helplessness the pathos of the victim. In bullying groups, bystanders are often conscripted in service of the bully, or his victim, or both. Bystanders may collaborate with the bully by concealing scenes of violence from authority figures; by slavishly carrying out the bully’s orders to bully others; or by taking turns submitting to the bully themselves. At the same time, bullies and victims both see in the bystander a means of aggrandizing their own narcissism by capturing the envy or the sympathy of an audience. Furthermore, all three of these positions can be transformed phantasmagorically into omnipotent “rescuer” roles, which help to distinguish “good” bullying groups from “bad” ones in the eyes of their own members. The abusive bully can become the kind of all-knowing and empathetic despot one both imitates and depends upon—like Kipling’s Head. But victims can also harbor fantasies of rescuing their victimizers through their own submission. Bystanders, in turn, use their detachment to fuel fantasies of rescue directed at either of the other two figures.

Bullying in Stalky & Co. always revolves around the triangulation of bully, victim, and bystander; the interchangeability of these three positions; and the morphing of each of them into “rescuer” roles. In the story “Stalky” (1898), which opens the expanded volume called The Complete Stalky & Co. (1929), these dynamics are enacted transparently. Stalky’s boys are first introduced to the reader as bystanders at a scene of bullying. Another group of boys, whose ringleader is named De Vitré, has taken revenge on a local farmer for a string of petty insults by stealing his cows. Finding that De Vitré’s scheme leaves him no opportunity to play a commanding role, Stalky refuses to participate, declaring: “We’re goin’
to watch” (12). From a secret hiding place inside a cart-house, Stalky’s
gang then voyeuristically witnesses a reversal of bullying roles: a group of
farmhands appears, imprisons De Vitré’s boys in an empty barn, and
inverts the positions of bully and victim, “De Vitré’s party promising,
entreating, and cajoling, while the natives laughed like Inquisitors.” The
gloating farmers taunt the boys with their impending flogging: “Yeou’ll
be wopped proper. ‘Rackon yeou’ll be asking for junkets to set in this
week o’ Sundays to come” (18).

At this point, Stalky’s bystanding gang nearly joins the victims.
The cows happen to gather around the cart-house, cutting off the
gang’s retreat, and leaving them vulnerable to exposure. Quickly
assuming a bullying role, though, the gang uses slingshots to enrage the
cows, which attack the two farmers who have since arrived on the scene
to relieve their farmhands. In the confusion, Stalky’s gang rescues De
Vitré’s boys, and then, without being seen, locks the besieged farmers
in the barn and revels sadistically in their helpless cries. To account for
their own presence at the scene, and to supply themselves with an alibi
for being late back at school, Stalky’s boys then call through an opening
in the barn and offer to rescue the farmers. Merging the roles of bully
and bystander, though, they first torment the farmers—one of whom
owns the cows, now desperate to be milked, and the other of whom
owns the lock on the barn door—by provoking an argument between
them about whether the lock should be broken. Finally, when Stalky’s
gang returns to school, they refuse De Vitré’s gratitude for being
rescued, and bully him instead: they force him to proclaim that Stalky
is a “Great Man,” and that he, De Vitré, is “a putrid ass.” Stalky also turns
De Vitré’s boys from bystanders who aspire to be fellow-sadists into
victimized bystanders: De Vitré’s gang clamors to be told the details of
Stalky’s triumph over the farmers, so that they can share vicariously in
it; but Stalky sadistically withholds these details, thereby aligning De
Vitré with his victims. “‘Now won’t you tell us?’ said De Vitré pleadingly,”
after submitting to the “Great Man.” “Not by a heap,” replies Stalky, and
the story ends without compromising this sadistic refusal: “Therefore
the tale has stayed untold till to-day” (27). That the reader has been told
this “untold” tale, however, raises questions about the reader’s own
passivity, and its unstable relationship to sadistic and masochistic
desire—questions that point to Kipling’s persistent efforts, throughout
his fiction, to enlist the reader within the sadomasochistic groups he
describes.
In “Stalky,” the triangular roles of the bullying scenario are relatively fluid. But within Stalky’s gang itself, these three roles are maintained in stable reciprocity. Stalky is the undisputed leader, the one most likely to administer what he calls “kickings” to the others. But there are moments when each of the boys rises in ascendancy over one of the others, with the third looking on. These consensual and ordered exchanges of roles distribute various kinds of narcissistic omnipotence among the three boys. Moreover, the group is structured externally as well as internally by reversible sadomasochistic relationships. Stalky’s gang takes an injury to any one of its members as an injury to the narcissism of the whole, and avenges all such attacks on its prestige and power. Yet the gang remains the permanent target of envious school-boys and masters, and it is defenseless against the beatings of the Head. Within this stable complex of positions, the gang’s vindictive bullying is fueled precisely by its presentation of itself as social victim—whether this victimization happens, on any given occasion, to be real or staged.

The Head himself participates in this reversible phantasmagorics, built on the bully/victim/bystander relationship, in which authorized bullies also seem to be aggrieved victims. In “The Satisfaction of a Gentleman” (1929), the Head finds himself compelled by one of the Directors of the school to administer a beating to Stalky’s gang. Suppressing his misgivings about the need for punishment on this occasion, the Head beats the three boys while the Director—assuming the role of bystander—listens from an adjoining room. Years later, the Head confesses to a friend that, while beating the boys, he had felt strangely like a victim himself: “I saw my face in the glass, like an ape’s—a frightened, revengeful ape. . . . It was all abject—paltry—time-serving—unjust” (256). This scene, in which the Head, in the act of bullying, feels himself to be bullied by an unjust bystander, and in which he becomes the helpless bystander of both himself-as-bully and himself-as-victim when he glimpses his own face in the mirror, captures an ambivalence that is always part of the Head’s authority. While ruling the school despotically, as its center of power, the Head is always profoundly alienated from the actual practices of the school, as carried out by his own house-masters, and stipulated by the Directors. In this sense, the Head’s omnipotence, like the gang’s, always harbors an aura of “injured innocence.”

Through this sadomasochistic reversibility, and precisely because he beats them, the Head is implicitly allied with Stalky’s gang
in a magical group that remains somewhat apart from the society of the school as a whole. By “magical group” I mean a narcissistically omnipotent bullying group that regards itself simultaneously both as the legitimately despotic center of social order, and as its permanently alienated victim. Magical groups draw their narcissistic omnipotence from both of these phantasmagoric positions, as well as from their insulation from any larger social collectivities that might interrupt the sadomasochistic relations that structure the group both internally and externally. This sadomasochistic paradox, I now want to suggest, profoundly organized Kipling’s view of class hierarchy, in the sense that he always tended to valorize the social authority of magical groups over other political or social configurations.

What is most striking about the magical group formed by Stalky’s gang, for example, is its hostility toward official social values. Stalky’s gang holds in contempt all the traditionally upper-class values that structure the public school—the honor of the house, athleticism, honesty and fair play, the prefectural system. More strikingly, the gang violently repudiates national values that one might think dear to Kipling’s own heart. In “The Flag of Their Country” (1899), for example, Stalky’s gang is horrified by a Conservative MP, who tries to appropriate their volunteer cadet-corps for patriotic purposes by bestowing a Union Jack on them during a formal public speech. Stalky calls the MP a “Jelly-bellied Flag-flapper” (220), and in response to M’Turk’s sarcastic question “Don’t you want to die for your giddy country?” Stalky responds: “Not if I can jolly well avoid it” (211). Critics have accepted at face-value the narrator’s explanation for this repudiation of patriotism—that is, that the MP speaks vulgarly of matters the boys consider sacred. But this interpretation ignores the conflict Kipling establishes between the cadet-corps as a magical group and official social values—which is to say, in this case, Tory values.

The story begins with Stalky’s transformation of a routine form of punishment—military drilling—into a means of self-glorification. Stalky takes over this ritualized punishment from Foxy, the school’s “Sergeant,” claiming he can prove that the boys excel at drilling themselves—and that he, in particular, “can drill as well as you, Foxy” (202). This masochistic role-reversal hints at the more momentous ways in which the school trains the boys to turn inglorious suffering into heroic imperial martyrdom. During the course of the story, the narrator tells us that Hogan “three years later [would] die in the Burmese sunlight outside Minhla Fort” (208), and that Perowne would
be “shot in Equatorial Africa by his own men” (212). But even as a game, the student-run cadet-corps brings the boys both the surprised approval of their superiors, and covert opportunities for bullying—bullying that structures the corps both internally and externally, and thus bathes it in the omnipotent psycho-dynamics of the magical group. Stalky “as usual [lays] down the law” (208), and becomes the corps’ “generalissimo” (212). Imitating the sadism of British drill sergeants, he revels in “withering invective” (213) against his fellow schoolboys, who, on their side, extract pleasure from being “told off an’ dressed down” (214). But the corps also uses its drilling to bully school authorities. The boys take pleasure in knowing that “this sort of secret-society biznai will drive King wild,” and the narrator tells us that “it troubled many more than King” (212). The Sergeant himself feels that the whole enterprise is a way of “makin’ fun of me” (212). These sadomasochistic dynamics are precisely what the MP’s flag-waving disrupts, as it shines a glaring public light on the fragile and inwardly focused solidarity of the magical group. Before this intervention, however, the cadet-corps manages to contain and express contradictory attitudes toward imperialism through the structural ambivalence magical groups maintain toward order and authority of any kind.

The psychological dynamics of magical groups have no essential affinity with any particular segment of the social order—though, for historical reasons, they resonated most strongly with the nineteenth-century British middle class’s uncertainty about its social centrality and power. That Kipling calls his magical group “Stalky & Co.,” a tag that parallels one boy’s resentful description of the College as “a limited liability company payin’ four per cent” (186), underlines the school’s precarious status on the middle-class fringes of public school education. In keeping with the school’s marginalized status, Kipling’s magical group consistently critiques upper-class values. In particular, Stalky & Co. deliberately opposes itself to the upper-class imperial ideology promoted by Thomas Hughes’s Tom Brown’s Schooldays (1857), which set the pattern for schoolboy fiction during the second half of the nineteenth century. Repudiating the swaggering bully figure that typified aristocratic Regency schoolboy fiction (represented by the villainous Flashman), Tom Brown’s Schooldays incarnated a new kind of upper-class schoolboy hero, whose social authority derived from his manly honor on the playing field and at war. Hughes’s novel exemplified the Tory patriotism of mid-century, which, as Joseph Bristow has pointed out,
“was designed to challenge the individualism of the liberal-minded middle classes who were to be viewed as traitors to their country by putting their hands in their pockets and vouching for peace” (58). In the wake of the Crimean War (1853–56), the notion that the public schools produced a chivalric warrior class promoted the identification of upper-class interests with imperialism. Hugh Cunningham has demonstrated that Tory imperialism outflanked middle-class politicians for much of the second half of the nineteenth century by cultivating this warrior ideal:

The measuring rod of patriotism was one erected by the Conservatives in the 1870s; the patriot was above class, loyal to institutions of the country, and resolute in defence and honour of its interests. Liberals, radicals and socialists who protested their own patriotism were singularly unsuccessful in wresting the initiative from the right. Patriotism was firmly identified with conservatism, militarism, royalism and racialism. (24)

Kipling’s assault on upper-class schoolboy ideals was an attempt to claim imperial ideology from the Tory upper class, and to identify it instead with a middle-class conception of imperial subjectivity. Ironically, Stalky & Co. rehabilitated the bullying figure that upper-class schoolboy fiction rejected, relocating it in Kipling’s newly glamorized middle-class bullies, and, more importantly, in the magical groups whose sadomasochistic energies were central to his conception of social hierarchy.29 By affirming magical groups that were both marginalized and central, victimized and omnipotent, Kipling managed imperial ambivalence while displacing upper-class imperial ideals. In the process, he reorganized patriotism around a recognizably middle-class psychological structure. This tenuous but seductive association of class identity with sadomasochism was reinforced, as I shall now propose, by more concrete ideological correlations.

III. Magical Professionals

The sadomasochistic patterns I have described in Stalky & Co. repeat those in Kipling’s Indian short fiction of the late 1880s and 1890s. But in his Indian fiction, Kipling also fused the psychological dynamics of sadomasochism with two disjunct middle-class ideological systems. One of Kipling’s most important ideological interventions, in fact, was his alignment of magical groups with both professional exper-
tise and evangelical values. This conjunction consolidated and revitalized middle-class ideological languages in two complementary ways: on the one hand, by infusing evangelical codes of self-denial and self-sacrifice with the social cachet enjoyed by late-century professionals; and, on the other, by injecting a moral center and a messianic spirit into professionalism—which Kipling and others felt was degenerating in late-nineteenth-century India, on account of both the deadliness of procedural routines and the absence of the culture of conquest that had galvanized Anglo-Indian society earlier in the century.30 This conjunction also had the potential to broaden middle-class ideological unity by linking an emergent upper-middle-class professional discourse to archaic spiritual values that, at the fin de siècle, had largely been relocated in the lower middle class. It thus helped produce the expansive popularity Kipling enjoyed, both in India and in Britain, as well as mixing distinctly different kinds of social support for the particular form of jingoism he inspired.

Readers have long recognized that Kipling held figures at the top of the political, military, or administrative hierarchies in contempt, but that he had a special regard for the middle-level professional. This kind of figure often plays a heroic role in the stories, especially those written during the 1890s, when—after having left India in 1889—Kipling’s occasionally satiric attitudes toward administrators gave way to consistent reverence. In “The Head of the District” (1890), for example, Kipling lionizes the dying Deputy Commissioner Yardley-Orde, who is adored by British subordinates and natives alike, and whose own love for them is as strong as his love for his wife. “It isn’t that I mind dying,” Yardley-Orde laments on his deathbed, “It’s leaving Polly and the district” (Life’s 104). The story goes on to celebrate Yardley-Orde’s subordinate officer Tallantire, who selflessly rescues the district from political chaos after his superior’s death. Similarly, “In the Rukh” (1893) idealizes the Forest Officer Gisborne, who “learns to grow wise in more than wood-lore alone; to know the people and the polity of the jungle” (Many 201–02). The first of Kipling’s Mowgli stories, “In the Rukh” also shows how Mowgli’s superhuman, magical abilities can be integrated into human society only by his joining the Civil Service as a forestry official.

Kipling’s admiration for professional figures rested on his adulation of technical knowledge—an adulation that reflected both the ascension of scientific authority in the later nineteenth century and the importance of knowledge-gathering as an instrument of colonial domi-
nation. Kipling’s fiction dramatizes the power wielded by professionals who possess specialized knowledge about departmental politics, administrative procedures, engineering, ethnography, and colonial argot (native, military, and technological). Even military expertise, whether possessed by officers or infantrymen, is especially honored when it seems to rest on, or at least to resemble, scientific knowledge. A subaltern in “A Conference of the Powers” (1890), for example, claims: “There’s nothing nicer than a satisfactory little expedition, when you find your plans fit together, and your conformation’s teek—correct, you know, and the whole sub-chiz—I mean, when everything works out like formulæ on a blackboard” (Many 35).

Of course, Kipling admired knowledge of all sorts—not simply the kinds of knowledge officially associated with professionals, or with middle-class occupations. His admiration extended to working-class expertise, to the stereotypically feminine arts, and even to the frontiersmanship skills of “savages.” Yet Kipling construed all these various forms of knowledge in unmistakably professional terms. Such knowledge, for Kipling, always required strict, impersonal detachment and judicious neutrality; devotion to a craft or a common cognitive base that could be formalized and reproduced; and membership in a guild of some kind that guarded, regulated, and distributed training. These features of Kiplingesque knowledge no doubt prompted Lionel Trilling to claim that, as a boy, he loved Kipling’s work because it “suggested the virtue of disinterested professional commitment” (87).

Kipling consistently stressed the congruity of non-middle-class forms of expertise with professionalism. Kim’s many raw talents, for example, are recognized and refined in Lurgan Sahib’s school for spies: what initially seem to be Kim’s uniquely personal skills for cross-cultural shape-shifting turn out to be arts that are the domain of the British Secret Service, which Kim can only perfect by submitting to its professional training. Similarly, Peachy Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, in “The Man Who Would Be King” (1888), recognize that colonial conquest depends on imitating the methods of professional soldiers, administrators, and judges. Even the romantic manipulations of Mrs. Hauksbee depend on her clubby alliances with women like Mrs. Mallowe, with whom she discusses objectives and techniques, and on the disinterested, intellectualized character of her seductions. They also reflect her belief in the value of information and instruction. Mrs. Hauksbee’s “rescue” of Pluffles is also the “education of Pluffles” (Plain 44). “The
Education of Otis Yeere” (1888) begins: “This is the history of a failure: but the woman who failed said that it might be an instructive tale to put into print for the benefit of the younger generation” (Wes 3). In *Stalky & Co.*, schoolboys, too, find that they can refine their bullying with the aid of professional knowledge: Beetle studies architecture to guide the placement of a dead cat under the floor boards of a rival house; M’Turk’s knowledge of game management enables him to make Colonel Dabney an ally; Beetle’s imitation of King’s rhetoric and vocabulary deepens the sting of his own invective.

Kipling’s eagerness to construe knowledge that emanated from a variety of social locations in professional terms served several middle-class ideological goals. For one thing, it reinforced the late-century notion that middle-class authority depended on its ability to appropriate the knowledge-domains of other social groups. Thus, Kipling’s narrator presents himself as an expert on experts. Kipling’s own ability as a writer to mimic the skills and the slang of lower-class types is a sign of the social prerogatives of the expert—not of his populism. Kipling also participated in a widespread late-century effort to train working-class and lower-middle-class youths as servants of empire by teaching them how to model themselves on the professional middle class. As a number of historians have suggested, interest in the training of young men to middle-class intellectual standards often arose in the late nineteenth century as a response to worries about working-class degeneration. One of the chief goals of the Boy Scouts, for example, was to train proletarian youths by disciplining them to middle-class intellectual standards, chief of which were perceptual and classificatory skills like those taught to Kim by Lurgan. Kipling’s professionals, by virtue of the social fluidity their expertise implied, also acquired a freedom from archaic bourgeois moral codes of conduct. Many of Kipling’s colonial experts take morality into their own hands, with his narratives’ evident approval. By affirming the moral license of experts of all kinds, Kipling followed a prevailing late-Victorian ideology, through which middle-class professionals asserted their cultural superiority by means of transgressive, unorthodox, and paradoxically antibourgeois forms of moral sophistication. Finally, Kipling’s extension of professional forms of knowledge across lines of class, gender, and race dramatized the magical omnipotence he wished to identify with those bodies of knowledge. By exceeding the class boundaries of official knowledge, Kipling’s idealized experts demonstrate the limitlessness of their epistemological power. It may be true that individ-
uals from non-middle-class backgrounds also had access to professional ranks throughout the nineteenth century, but, as Harold Perkin has demonstrated, the key features of professional discourse—its reverence for technical knowledge, its specific moral values, and its use of organizations to limit and control membership—had deep roots in middle-class culture, and promised upward mobility primarily to its middle-class constituents (254–60).

While Kipling’s admiration for professionals has been widely recognized, the affinities between professionalism and sadomasochism in his work have not.37 As a result, critics have overlooked the reversible power relations generated by sadomasochistic forms of knowledge (including the role of the “knowing” bystander in professional networks—a role often played by Kipling’s narrator). Kipling often makes expertise the vehicle for sadistic revenge—as in “Pig” (1887), for example, when a government official named Nafferton takes revenge on a colleague who had sold him a bad horse by sending the colleague on a bureaucratic wild-goose chase. Occasionally, this kind of sadism is associated with the expertise required to run the Empire, especially when it creates intimate alliances within imperial groups. When Private Otheris—a celebrated, expert marksman—shoots a sniper in “On Greenhow Hill” (1890), for example, he is portrayed as viciously, coldly triumphant: he looks at the corpse “with the smile of the artist who looks on the completed work” (Life’s 83). But this perverse artistry forges an intimate sadomasochistic link between Otheris and the three men (including the narrator) who play the part of voyeuristic bystanders, passively watching his murderous skill. One of these bystanders, Learoyd, actually identifies with the slain sniper: having recounted a tale of his own suffering over a woman he had loved, he reflects mournfully: “Happen there was a lass tewed up wi’ him, too” (Life’s 83). Sometimes, Kipling’s experts enjoy the discomfiture of the victims of their knowledge because it signals the victim’s exclusion from a magical group—as when the subalterns in “A Conference of the Powers” lord it over an ignorant civil servant. At other times, though, intimate bullying through superior knowledge is a sign of the sadomasochistic affection that binds magical groups together—as when Private Mulvaney occasionally rebukes the narrator: “An’ you thinkin’ you know things!” (Plain 151). The narrator himself often teases his readers in this fashion, taunting them with his superior knowledge: breaking off a digression, he tells us “that is quite enough for you to know” (78);
anticipating the reader’s skepticism, he scoffs that “a little bit of sober fact is more than you can stand” (126).

Conversely, professional knowledge offered opportunities for masochistic indulgences. Kipling often emphasized the tremendous suffering and deprivation that must be endured to gain knowledge. In “Wressley of the Foreign Office” (1887), for example, the protagonist subjects himself to isolation, the deferral of his romantic desires, and the disruption of his promising career to gain his “special and laboriously acquired knowledge” (*Plain* 226–27). At times, too, Kipling saw suffering as itself the stimulus to knowledge. As he explained in *Something of Myself* (1937), his own childhood beatings enabled him to cultivate techniques of “knowingness” that later served him well as a professional writer: “constant wariness, the habit of observation, and attendance on moods and tempers; the noting of discrepancies between speech and action; a certain reserve of demeanour; and automatic suspicion of sudden favors” (11). Kipling also frequently suggested that the most profound knowledge of all is the knowledge of cruelty and suffering. Many of his characters are gripped by melancholic convictions about the inevitability of suffering, which is the principal yield of their hard-won knowledge. At the end of “Baa Baa, Black Sheep” (1888), for example, when Punch is restored to his mother’s love, the narrator stresses the permanence of Punch’s knowledge of pain: “[W]hen young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Susception, and Despair, all the Love in the world will not wholly take away that knowledge” (*Wee* 310).

Kipling insisted, too, that those who possess specialized knowledge are doomed to suffer the neglect, misunderstanding, and abuse of others. So it is that Strickland, perhaps the most knowledgeable policeman in all India, finds that his knowledge “had done him no good in the eyes of the Indian Government” (*Plain* 25). Scott, in “William the Conqueror” (1895), is untroubled by the irony, “not rare in India, of knowing that another man was reaping where he had sown” (*Day’s* 216). Sometimes, this neglect is deeply embittering, and characters must work to transcend the emotional pain that is also the badge of their heroic worthiness. Tallantire, who knows his district thoroughly, must assume all the responsibility for running it but none of the credit, which goes to the Bengali installed over him by a Liberal government. “I know what I’ve got to do,” Tallantire declares, “and I’m going to do it. But it’s hard” (*Life’s* 111).
Most important, the martyrdom of the expert is always witnessed in Kipling’s work by his onlooking, sympathetic professional colleagues. Tallantire may have to play the role of martyr, but it wins him the respect and love of his fellow-official Bullows, the policeman Curbur, and the garrison commander Tommy Dodd. In “At the End of the Passage” (1890), knowledge of the loneliness and terror of life binds together the four professionals Mottram, Lowndes, Spurstow, and Hummil in a bleak kind of solidarity. In “The Bridge-Builders” (1893), Findlayson and Hitchcock “trusted each other” and desire to “go up the service together” because of the bond formed by their common history of pain and deprivation: “[T]hey had been tried many times in sudden crises” (Day’s 4). Scott, in “William the Conqueror,” realizes that “there were men in the North who would know what he had done” (Day’s 218–19). Though critics have sometimes seen Kipling’s colonial administrators as lonely, marginalized figures, it is crucial to recognize that their melancholy is witnessed by a fraternity of bystanders who identify fully with the victimization of experts, and with the glorification such victimage confers. This recognition of suffering—whether direct or indirect—underlies the glorious heroism Kipling associates with his professional imperialists, “who without hope of reward or public favor or any expressed approval will go out and die in strange places for the good of the various races they have taken under their wing” (Letters 2: 346).

The story “Thrown Away” (1888) displays concisely many of these relationships between professionalism, sadomasochism, bully/victim/bystander triads, and magical groups. In this story, a young subaltern, whose parents sheltered him from worldly knowledge, is unable to manage worldly pleasures—alcohol, gambling, women—and is ruined. Taking his failures far too seriously—again, because he lacks knowledge of the world—the subaltern asks leave to go on a hunting trip, retires to a deserted Canal Engineer’s Rest House, and shoots himself. After the subaltern has left for the Rest House, one of the majors in the regiment guesses his intentions—thus demonstrating the Major’s own worldly knowledge. The Major does some detective work and finds that the subaltern has taken only a revolver and writing-case on his trip. The Major then enlists the aid of the narrator-journalist, whose own knowingness establishes an instantaneous bond between the two men (“I saw what was in his mind” [Plain 19]; “I saw exactly what that help would be” [20]). Besides the bond of worldly knowledge, the
military man and the journalist also share the professional’s moral license to finesse the truth. “Can you lie?” the Major asks the narrator, who responds: “It’s my profession” (19). After rushing to the Rest House but arriving—as they had feared—too late, the two men conspire to bury the subaltern and conceal all evidence of his suicide, including his suicide notes. They spare his parents pain by writing a letter full of lies about their son’s successful career and noble death, and report to their superiors that the subaltern died of cholera.

In their conspiracy, the Major and the narrator enact a reversible sadomasochistic relationship. The Major, a “masterful man” (19), draws the narrator out of his detached, voyeuristic observation of the subaltern’s decline to enlist him in a plot that both men feel to be cruel, as well as rescuing and redemptive. The narrator comes to know “exactly how a murderer feels” (22), and, in fact, both men are said to feel “like murderers” (23). The narrator’s sense of cruelty is particularly acute when he imagines the recipients of his deceitful letter: “I choked while I was putting down these things and thinking of the poor people who would read them” (21). The sadism latent in the writing of this letter bubbles up in the next sentence: “Then I laughed at the grotesqueness of the affair, and the laughter mixed itself up with the choke” (21–22). As they bury the subaltern, the Major and the narrator share a bizarre “laughing-fit” (22). Although the laughter can partly be attributed to the tension of the situation, it mixes uncomfortably with the sarcasm which the narrator had freely indulged toward the subaltern in the story’s opening pages. The narrator satirizes the subaltern’s vulnerability to events that “hurt his feelings” (18), compares him repeatedly to a puppy, and generally condescends to what he calls “The Boy’s follies” (21). The two men’s cover-up also thwarts the final wishes of the subaltern, adding another twist to his victimization by frustrating his last attempts to revenge himself on people and circumstances he believed had victimized him. The narrator’s tendency toward heartless mockery—he refers to the subaltern condescendingly throughout the story as “The Boy”—is complemented, however, by both his and the Major’s identification with the subaltern’s pain. Toward the end of the story, the Major tells “awful stories of suicide or nearly-carried-out suicide. . . . He said that he himself had once gone into the same Valley of Shadow as The Boy. . . . so he understood how things fought together in The Boy’s poor jumbled head” (23). This masochistic identification is completed when the two men send a lock of the Major’s hair back to
the subaltern’s parents, presenting it as their son’s—the subaltern’s own hair being too bloodied for this purpose.

Finally, the Major and the narrator share the ambivalence toward social authority characteristic of magical groups. The two men clearly act in defense of national codes of honor (“Nice sort of thing to spring on an English family!” [21], the Major says, after reading the subaltern’s suicide notes). But they also violate conventional procedures, bringing official dishonor on themselves, which they accept stoically: “Many people . . . found time to say that the Major had behaved scandalously in not bringing in the body for a regimental funeral” (23). The narrator also displays a trace of self-pity at the unrewarded, unappreciated nature of their heroism: when the subaltern’s mother writes to them about “the obligation she would be under to [them] as long as she lived,” the narrator observes: “[S]he was under an obligation, but not exactly as she meant” (23). The Major and the narrator thus constitute themselves as a misunderstood community of two, which is triangulated through their sadomasochistic relationship to the subaltern—above all, in the sense of unrecognized virtue and injury shared by all three men. Having been let in on the secret of the cover-up, the bystanding reader is also implicitly engaged as a member of this knowing but misunderstood magical group—the narrator’s movement across the threshold between observation and involvement modeling our own ambiguous affective positioning.

Through sadomasochistic bonding of this kind, facilitated by professional styles of knowledge, Kipling harnessed an emergent, late-century, upper-middle-class ideological system to the psychological dynamics of magical groups. Specialized knowledge would not have galvanized his magical groups nearly so effectively if it did not collaborate in the sadomasochistic tendencies of such groups to forge internal bonds through the intimacies of bully, victim, and bystander relationships, and to stand united externally against a British colonial government that could be seen both as congruent with their own omnipotent power, and as the persecutor of those whose superior knowledge never received the recognition or rewards that it deserved.

IV. Evangelicalism and Middle-Class Unilateralism

Kipling made similar use of a historically discordant, atavistic middle-class discourse that also shared certain affinities with sado-
masochism: evangelicalism. Despite Kipling’s contempt for religious zealots, evangelicalism infused the spiritualized tone of his work, as well as his frequent allusions to the Bible and the hymnal. His awareness of evangelicalism’s sadomasochistic potentials is often expressed quite clearly—for example, through the abuse Punch suffers in “Baa Baa Black Sheep” at the hands of his evangelical guardian and her sadistic son. But in Kipling’s Anglo-Indian writings, the specifically sadomasochistic aspects of his evangelical borrowings are most evident in his idealization of imperial suffering and self-sacrifice. In a famous letter to his cousin Margaret in 1885, Kipling claimed that “if ever a foreign country was made better through ‘the blood of the martyrs’ India is that country” (Letters 1: 98). In his fiction and poetry, Kipling celebrated imperial martyrs like Mrs. McKenna of “The Daughter of the Regiment” (1887), or Bobby Wick of “Only a Subaltern” (1888), who both sacrifice their lives while tending the victims of cholera epidemics; or like the colonists who leave loved ones behind in “The Exiles’ Line” (1890). In journalistic essays he honored a variety of administrative, military, and technocratic imperial martyrs.39 Evangelical values also underlay Kipling’s idealization of the work-oriented asceticism that inspires a character like Hummil, in “At the End of the Passage,” to stay at his post even though his nerves are shot, in order to spare another, weaker man with a sick wife: “I thought all that sort of thing was dead and done with,” Dr. Spurstaw tells him; Hummil responds: “Bosh! You’d do the same yourself” (Life’s 178).

Kipling also idealized evangelical forms of expiation. Perhaps one of the most striking instances occurs in Kim (1901): the lama’s quest to be washed in the waters that will cleanse him of sin, and thereby free him of human desire, is actually more expressive of evangelical values than of Buddhist beliefs. Following in the footsteps of James Fraser and Max Muller, Kipling greatly exaggerated Indian mysticism, particularly its supposed belief in the illusionary nature of the material world (Waghorne 255). He exploited this misunderstanding by using the lama to express an antimaterialistic spiritualism with distinctly evangelical overtones of repentance. “The sin is mine and the punishment is mine” (92), the lama declares when he recognizes he must relinquish Kim’s services. The apparent complementarity of Kim’s expert spying and the lama’s all-consuming quest to free himself from sin and desire—a combination that perfectly embodies Kipling’s fusion of professional and evangelical values—absorbs both characters in an elaborate pilgrimage of
expiation at the end of the novel, a pilgrimage that also folds both characters into the sadomasochistic group represented by the British Secret Service, which their journey of expiation serves. But such expiation also fuels omnipotent grandiosity: both the lama and Kim’s original mentor in espionage, Mahbub Ali, agree that his spiritual pilgrimage has prepared Kim to “go forth as a teacher” (285).

The sadomasochism inherent in Kipling’s evangelical borrowings helped reinforce magical groups in familiar ways: by legitimating relationships of authority and submission, by extending sadomasochistic social bonds through the shared witnessing of suffering, and by incorporating the omnipotent qualities of masochistic suffering into a collective sense of legitimacy and power. But Kipling’s evangelical impulses also had important atavistic qualities, which were implicated in both imperial and class ideologies in complex ways. Their imperial implications are, perhaps, more well known. As Eric Stokes and other historians have demonstrated, evangelicalism exercised a significant influence over British policy in India during much of the first half of the nineteenth century. Charles Grant and John Shore, for example—the former a director of the East India Company, the latter advisor to Cornwallis—became founding members of the Clapham Sect after returning to England, and they made the evangelical reform of India one of the chief goals of the Clapham movement. After the 1813 Charter Act opened up India to missionaries, evangelicals helped liberalize Indian education, government policy, and the Indian Civil Service. Organized evangelical activity waned after mid-century, however—both in India and in England. But evangelical attitudes and postures continued to sustain Anglo-Indian culture—especially in the wake of the Mutiny—by portraying the defense of colonialism as a spiritual crusade. Military leaders who suppressed the Mutiny were dubbed with titles that made them, as John MacKenzie puts it, “evangelical knights, defenders of the faith as well as the Empire.” James Outram was known as the “Bayard of India,” and Herbert Edwardes was referred to as a “military bishop” by John Ruskin (MacKenzie, “Metropolitan” 281). Stokes has gone so far as to claim that “the key” to British rule during the latter half of the nineteenth century was its “transposition of evangelicalism to wholly secular objects, or alternatively the translation of secular objectives to a religious level.” He adds that this idea took its “final shape in the teaching of Kipling” (308).

But Kipling’s evangelical borrowings had another kind of
atavistic resonance that intersected domestic British class relations for quite different purposes. By combining emergent professional ideals with evangelical ideals—both touching in various ways on the logic of sadomasochism—Kipling linked together the ideological languages of two fractured elements of middle-class culture in domestic society. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the class in Britain most drawn to evangelical values was the lower middle class. This class had grown substantially due to the widening of elementary education, the bureaucratization of commerce, and the expansion and internationalization of the financial industry (which required an army of clerks). Yet membership in the lower middle class was increasingly insecure after 1870 as a result of the increasing unionization of the working class and competition from women and educated immigrants. The lower-middle-class clerk was also embattled culturally in the face of working-class disdain for his effeminacy and bourgeois contempt for his vulgarity. In these circumstances, lower-middle-class Britons propped up both their embattled social dignity and their economic vulnerability by resurrecting archaic middle-class discourses of social respectability, especially moral ones—at a time when the gentrified ranks immediately above them were increasingly scorning those values (McLeod). The widespread jingoism among the lower middle class at this time has been understood, in part, as a way of clinging to moral codes of service and self-sacrifice that had historically been identified with middle-class respectability (Price).

It was to this class, and not to the working-class crowd, that Kipling’s evangelicalism addressed itself. As George Orwell put it: “Can one imagine any private soldier, in the ’nineties or now, reading Barrack-Room Ballads and feeling that here was a writer who spoke for him? . . . ‘What have I done for thee, England, my England?’ is essentially a middle-class query. Almost any working man would follow it up immediately with ‘What has England done for me?’” (149). Recent historians have confirmed that working-class readers for the most part ignored Kipling. Jonathan Rose includes Kipling in a list of writers who were favored by the late-Victorian middle classes and therefore installed in school curricula, but who went unread by working-class readers making their selections from lending libraries—that is, when they were “uncontaminated by middle-class cultural hegemony” (244–45).

Kipling’s fusion of professional and evangelical values through magical groups thus blended upper- and lower-middle-class ideological
languages. It was this imaginative fusion that produced the broadened middle-class appeal of his work that some have misconstrued as “classlessness.” Kipling’s projection of seemingly unified middle-class values, it should be noted, constituted a rewriting of his colonial—as well as his metropolitan—ideological inheritance. By fusing professional and evangelical ideals, Kipling replayed, in a sense, the union of utilitarian and evangelical reform movements in 1820s and 1830s India. Kipling repeated an emphasis on rational individualism, the value of knowledge and education, the inherent depravity of animal nature, and the prospect of self-transformation through devotion to duty that had characterized both of these earlier movements. Yet there are some striking differences. For one thing, Kipling’s affirmation of professional expertise expressed a narrower middle-class ideal than the faith in rationality and abstract principles of social good that was central to utilitarianism. More important, perhaps, Kipling’s fusion of professional authority with evangelicalism had none of the utopian optimism of these earlier movements. Kipling did not believe his magical groups would radically transform political structures, as utilitarians and evangelicals had hoped; it is not clear he believed they could even make existing institutions more efficient, which was the moderate goal of most late-century Anglo-Indian reforms. Rather, his magical groups were entrenched in a sadomasochistic defensiveness that deepened the insularity of their aggrieved claims to imperial authority. Kipling also had no interest in native assimilation, which was a hallmark of both evangelical and utilitarian reform earlier in the century; likewise, he distanced himself from the socially leveling tendencies that had been central to these movements. The middle-class ideological fusion for which he stood depended on the permanence of social hierarchy, rather than its diminishment; and on the promotion of a particular social class (however mythic his view of its unity may have been), which he regarded as cruelly disenfranchised, but also, for that very reason, magically powerful.

Benita Parry once charged that Kipling “moved empire from the margins of English fiction to its centre without interrogating the official metropolitan culture” (51). I would argue that, quite the contrary, Kipling displaced upper-class imperial ideology with an entirely different psycho-social conception of British authority, and was thus profoundly concerned with interrogating both metropolitan and colonial cultures. His goal, of course, was never to dismantle imperi-
alism, but rather to reformulate it within a revised psycho-social model of political power—a transformation not without its consequences, both in Britain and in India. That “Recessional” (1897), with its self-lacerating imperial arrogance, became the most popular poem in the English language over the first half of the twentieth century, signals the successful broadening of middle-class imperial subjectivity through sadomasochistic omnipotence that Kipling helped engineer. Kipling may have reached out to non-middle-class readers, but his ideological foundations rested on an imaginative fusion of discrete middle-class values. As Perkin once reminded us: “The whole purpose of a [class] ideal was to sublimate the interest of a class and present it in a form acceptable to men of other classes” (322). Defenses of Kipling’s “classlessness”—like those with which I began this essay—obscure the virulent class politics underlying Kipling’s consolidation of middle-class ideological systems. They also obscure the ways in which reversible attitudes toward social hierarchy—in particular, the adulation of British imperial authority and the self-righteous contempt for it that Kipling mixed together so well—could collaborate within a sadomasochistic social subject whose primary allegiances were not to the empire, but to class-coded modes of solidarity and domination.

Notes

1 For help with an earlier draft of this essay, I am grateful to the members of the Nineteenth-Century Studies Group at the National Humanities Center, 2002–03: Ginger Frost, Jonathan Riley, Harriet Ritvo, Molly Rothenberg, and Dianne F. Sadoff.

2 Good examples are Randall, Imperial Boy; Mohanty; and JanMohammed. McBratney explicitly calls Kipling a precursor of Bhabha on account of his fascination with a particular figure of Anglo-Indian hybridity, the native-born colonizer (167–69).

3 Metcalf speaks for many when he cites Kipling as an instance of “coping with contradiction”: “Kipling made visible the psychic tensions that lay hidden beneath the seemingly placid surface of the late Victorian Raj” (161). Among those who sympathize with Kipling’s efforts to overcome his jingoism, Sullivan sees Kipling as “the quintessentially divided imperial subject” (6), but affirms his attempts to contain those divisions in familial metaphors that included native subjects and concerns. Nandy claims more wistfully that Kipling tried “to keep alive a subjugated strain of his civilization in the perceived weaknesses of another” (70). Said grants that Kipling constructed a positive image of India, but argues that he remained blinded by the British view of India as a land of permanent bucolic subjection. For readings that emphasize Kipling’s loyalties to British imperialism, see Williams, Matin, Suleri (esp. 111–31), and Moore-Gilbert.
4There have been a small number of studies focused on gender and sexual orientation that have similarly attended to the unstable valence of Kipling’s texts. Mohanty discusses the ways gendered notions about female invisibility destabilize Kipling’s persistent belief that colonial control can be achieved through strategies of self-camouflage; David discusses the gender privileges of Kipling’s boy-children; Lane discusses the contradictions between desire and mastery in Kipling’s representation of homoerotic relationships.

5Of his many contemporary critics, Buchanan most famously stigmatized Kipling’s indulgence in cruelty and vindictiveness. Orwell cited Kipling’s “definite strain of sadism” in arguing that it “is no use pretending that Kipling’s view of life, as a whole, can be accepted or even forgiven by any civilized person” (140–41). Wilson sought to explain through psycho-biography how it was that “the whole of Kipling’s life” was “shot through with hatred” (111), and concluded that “a first principle of Kipling’s world is revenge” (173). Ford spoke for the Scrutiny group generally when he censured Kipling’s enthusiasm for revenge. Tompkins devoted a chapter of The Art of Rudyard Kipling to a defense of his characteristic emphasis on vengeance. For good discussions of the various critical positions taken over several decades on the issue of Kipling’s viciousness and cruelty, see Orel 10–11, or Porter.

6In citing Kipling’s work, I have used the 1987 Oxford texts where these exist—that is, for Plain Tales from the Hills (1888), Kim (1901), and The Complete Stalky & Co. (1929). Otherwise, I have used the Uniform Edition for stories published in Wee Willie Winkie and Other Stories (1888), Life’s Handicap (1891), Many Inventions (1893), and The Day’s Work (1898). Throughout the essay, dates in parentheses refer to first publication—which, for stories and poems, includes magazine publication.

7Kaul documents the strict limits Kipling placed on the play of desire across racial boundaries. Suleri also summarizes well the failures of cross-cultural desire in Kipling’s work.

8See also Kupperman and Marshall.

9Wilson called Stalky & Co. “a hair-raising picture of the sadism of the English public-school system” (111). Maugham commented that “a more odious picture of school life can seldom have been drawn” (vi).

10Buchanan, for example, claimed that “it is simply impossible to show by mere quotation the horrible vileness of the book describing these three small fiends in human likeness; only a perusal of the whole work would convey to the reader its truly repulsive character” (125). In Something of Myself, Kipling responded to such attacks: “This led me to wonder, not for the first time, at which end of their carcasses grown men keep their school memories” (80). A small critical minority has cast the boys’ vindictive tactics as the last resort of innocent children seeking only their own survival—tactics that “the schoolboy needs in order to keep up his end against authority and the school ethos” (Quigley xix).

11In “Instincts” and in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud argued that all masochism is rooted in “eroticogenic 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 re-sexualized. Lacan re-understood Freud’s concept of primary masochism in terms of the compulsion to repeat, which he equated with entry into the symbolic and, therefore, with oedipal sexuality (80–83). See also Laplanche’s
famous post-structuralist reading of masochism (85–102), in which he declares: “[W]e shall . . . reserve the terms sadistic (sadism) and masochistic (masochism) for tendencies, activities, fantasies, etc., that necessarily involve, either consciously or unconsciously, an element of sexual excitement or enjoyment” (87).

12The seminal work is Bergler. Major contributions to this tradition include Brenner, Stolorow, Cooper, Chasseguet-Smirgel, and Blos. The most comprehensive recent account is Novick and Novick, Fearful, which also provides an excellent overview. In “Barbarians,” Novick and Novick argue that Freud at one time posited narcissistic injury and omnipotent fantasy as the origin of sadomasochism (or, at least, as the source for the first phase of the beating fantasy); but that he abandoned this line of thought in favor of explanations based on both the drive model, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and the structural model, in “The Economic Problem of Masochism.” For a discussion of the differences between relational and other approaches to sadomasochism, see Hanly.

13A good overview of the relational view of omnipotent fantasy is Novick and Novick, “Omnipotence.”

14Wells, for example, saw this incident as “the key to the ugliest, most retrogressive, and finally fatal idea of modern imperialism: the idea of a tacit conspiracy between the law and illegal violence” (522). For representative modern exculpations, see Perkins, who protests lamely that “any reader familiar with modern television is used to far more brutality” (70); or Stewart, who argues that the beating of Campbell and Sefton merely exemplifies Kipling’s deep hatred of bullies (48).

15See Novick and Novick (Fearful 53–56), or Glenn.

16Novick and Novick claim that “what was initially an acceptance of the mother’s externalizations . . . in the service of retaining the object becomes an active internalization used by the child to maintain the image of a loving, protective, perfect mother, safe from the destructive rage of his anal sadism” (Fearful 29).

17Novick and Novick have described the logic of idealizing the abuser in these terms: “Denial was a major defense in our masochistic patients. It was maintained by omnipotent fantasy in which everything painful was turned into a sign of special favor, uniqueness, and magical power. Inappropriate physical handling of the child . . . was transformed in fantasy into a triumphant oedipal victory, a sign of the omnipotent force of the child’s demands and his power to coerce mother into gratifying any and all needs” (Fearful 56).

18On this point, see Almond 18–19.

19In “An English School,” Kipling wrote that “the Head always told us that there was not much justice in the world, and that we had better accustom ourselves to the lack of it early” (264).

20In Something of Myself, Kipling wrote: “One of the most difficult things to explain to some people is that a boy of seventeen or eighteen can thus beat a boy barely a year his junior, and on the heels of the punishment go for a walk with him; neither party bearing malice or pride” (20).

21Quigley, among others, makes this point (xxxvi). See also Sullivan 114.

22This body of work often references Bion, particularly his claim that groups tend to select and submit to a despotic leader in order to resolve conflicts between individual and group identity. Another common reference point is Robert Stoler. Some of the most notable recent work includes Volkan (“Narcissistic” and Need). Post usefully applies
Volkan’s work to contemporary political struggles. See also the work of Twemlow (“Psychoanalytic,” “Roots,” and “Traumatic”).

23See, for example, Volkan, Need 30–38.

24See, in particular, Sacco, Twemlow, and Williams.

25Twemlow sees this adoption of rescuer roles primarily as a reaction formation against identification with sadistic violence (“Traumatic” 577). Novick and Novick contend that sadism always involves both destructive and “reparative” delusions because of its involvement in omnipotent fantasy (“Omnipotence” 51).

26This story, published in magazine form in 1898 and clearly intended to introduce the three central characters, was withheld from the 1899 publication of Stalky & Co. because of complaints from reviewers that it seemed to endorse cruelty to animals. It was restored as the introductory story to The Complete Stalky & Co., issued in 1929. See Harbord 1: 423.

27This formulation puts me at odds with critics who claim that Kipling simply “subverts” the school as a coherent, ordered hierarchy. See Randall, Imperial Boy 94, or “Stalky” 164.

28See, for example, Marcus 159–60; Moss 16; or Bristow 79.

29Bristow views Stalky’s gang as a “gents’ club” (75), representing a “minority Conservative belief” about the authority of colonial officials over politicians. This interpretation seems to ignore the drift of his own argument—that is, that the gang affirms a radical form of individualism over against the traditional values of the public school.

30Many historians and literary critics have noted that Anglo-Indian observers worried over the loss of a conquest mentality, and over the enervations of bureaucratic routine in late-nineteenth-century India. See Wurgaft 32–41 and Metcalf 160–71.

31Good discussions of the role of colonial knowledge as a form of social control in India can be found in Susan Bayly 119; C. A. Bayly; Richards; Dirks; and Viswanathan 27–30. For representative treatments of the knowledge/power relation in Kipling’s work, see Williams and Montefiore.

32These are the principal features of professionalism identified by Larson 35, 40–41.

33Bristow makes this point, although he attributes Stalky’s mimicking of lower-class types to the prerogatives of “gentlemanliness” (79).

34See, for example, Soloway 38–59; or Brantlinger 227–53.

35Bristow describes the scientific and professional standards that Baden-Powell’s Scouting for Boys (1908) sought to disseminate (188–95, 205–06). See also Mohanty 329–31.

36I have discussed this phenomenon extensively in The Power of Lies.

37Wurgaft, for example, has written very usefully on the grandiose delusions of colonial professionals, but he explains them only as a consequence of overconfidence in the superiority of British self-control (64–65, 144–46).

38For a typical account of the loneliness of Kipling’s administrators, see Wurgaft 78.

39In “A Free Gift” (1888) for example, Kipling portrayed a representative English bureaucrat, who responds to the slanders of a Bengali newspaper editor by saying: “Keep on slanging me. I’m paid for it, you know, and I can’t hit back. Look here, we’ll make a bargain. You can call me a thief, a bureaucrat, a rascal, an unsympathetic alien, and anything else that you like, every day except Sundays, and I won’t say a word if . . . you’ll only help me to clean up a few sewers now and again” (3). Or, in “Letters of Marque, XIII”
(1888) he described the fate of an engineer designing an aqueduct: “Was the City grateful? Not in the least. It said that the Sahib wanted the water to run up-hill and was throwing money into the tank” (30).

44 Davis attributes the lapsing of evangelicalism after mid-century to its increasingly rigidified doctrines, its anti-intellectualism, its unresponsiveness to the rise of secular humanism, and its hostility to science (105–09).


46 MacKenzie, “Metropolitan,” claims that the Mutiny helped inspire a spirit of “Christian militarism” in India (282), which led, among others things, to the founding of patriotic religious organizations—such as the Salvation Army in 1878.

47 See also MacKenzie, “Myths.”

48 Rose also quotes a miner who described Kipling as “a nobody who sings what he can sing with a mouth-organ although he does talk of tambourines” (243). Holden argues that Kipling developed “a populist imperial literary vision to appeal to a middle class [sic] audience at home” (101).

49 Stokes elaborates on the similarities I have described (54–55). See also Young 11–12. Nevertheless, Viswanathan explores the important tensions between evangelical and utilitarian views of education (77). Stokes stresses the differences between utilitarian faith in government and evangelical commitments to divine law (55–56).

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