



# Deaf to women: Rhodes's refusal to hear women or his own feminine voice within – a reading of Schreiner's Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland

Rajendra Chetty & Matthew Curr

**To cite this article:** Rajendra Chetty & Matthew Curr (2016) Deaf to women: Rhodes's refusal to hear women or his own feminine voice within – a reading of Schreiner's Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland, *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies - Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity*, 11:1, 5-21, DOI: [10.1080/18186874.2016.1212460](https://doi.org/10.1080/18186874.2016.1212460)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18186874.2016.1212460>



Published online: 22 Aug 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# DEAF TO WOMEN: RHODES'S REFUSAL TO HEAR WOMEN OR HIS OWN FEMININE VOICE WITHIN – A READING OF SCHREINER'S *TROOPER PETER HALKET OF MASHONALAND*

**Rajendra Chetty**

Faculty of Education  
Cape Peninsula University of Technology  
Chettyr@cput.ac.za

**Matthew Curr**

Faculty of Education  
Cape Peninsula University of Technology  
CurrM@cput.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

E.D. Morel's chapter, 'The story of Southern Rhodesia', in his signal text *The black man's burden* (1920), provides intertextual reference to Olive Schreiner's work *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) in discussing libertarian thought and distinguishing aspects of male/female authorship. Schreiner's feminist perspective affords her a wider purview of colonialist prerogatives than those exhibited by several contemporary male observers or commentators. The figure of Jesus, as pictured in her neglected political/moral parable, far from being ironic, sentimental



International Journal of African Renaissance Studies  
Volume 11 | Number 1 | 2016  
pp. 5–21

DOI: 10.1080/18186874.2016.1212460  
Print ISSN 1818-6874 | Online 1753-7274  
© 2016 University of South Africa

or evangelical in purpose, embodies her ideal balance of female and male qualities. Schreiner relies on this redemptive icon both in an ethical and gendered sense to project new understanding and enlightenment onto the strife of the day, which allows her, in turn, to expose and critique Rhodes's male deafness both to women and his own feminine nature. By contrast, Halket's conversion, his feminisation, holds up the alternative of hope versus Rhodes's predatory male soul and final moral damnation.

**Keywords:** feminist perspective; Olive Schreiner; *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2004, J. Glover wrote a perceptive review<sup>1</sup> of Stanley's (2002) important study of Schreiner, Imperialism, labour and the new woman. Glover (2004, 158) notes that

the majority of the chapters concentrate on Schreiner's political writings, skipping over her novels in a mere four pages, excluding the overtly political *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. Although this does fit in with her stated task, it does slightly diminish her earlier claim that *all* of Schreiner's writings contribute to her positioning Schreiner as a woman of 'ideas'.

This lacuna regarding *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (hereafter *Peter Halket*) is puzzling, since Stanley wrote so lucidly about Trooper Halket in 2000. But Stanley's silence does invite further critical attention. This is especially so in light of Schreiner's feminist anti-war appeal in Stanley's 2002 text: an aspect of Schreiner's thought that, as Glover (op. cit., 159) indicates, occupies a large thematic concern in Stanley's volume: 'Stanley particularly emphasizes Schreiner's analysis of "sex parasitism" and her proposition of "social mothering" (the acceptance of the burden of caring by both male and female) as a way to stop war – a topic to which Stanley returns throughout the book'. Stanley's reluctance<sup>2</sup> to discuss *Peter Halket* in terms of 'social mothering' in her book allows for the issue of male and female nurturing, inter alia, to be dealt with in this article.

## PROVIDING A FEMINIST CONTEXT FOR SCHREINER'S *PETER HALKET*

*The black man's burden* by E.D. Morel was first published in 1920, while Schreiner's *Peter Halket* was published contemporaneously with Rhodes's invasion of sovereign land. The probity of both these libertarian writers has been vindicated by time, just as Rhodes's colonial ambitions have been exposed as mercenary rather than humanitarian. Few would question the ethical record of bulldog Morel: the man who revealed gross crimes against humanity in Leopold's rapacious administration of vast Congo possessions. Yet Morel's text, 'The story of Rhodesia', betrays unexpected

prejudices embedded in the subconscious mind of this famed liberal activist. The following extracts manifest hidden attitudes or codified assumptions to which even he seemed blind:

The portion of the Continent south of the Zambezi is – with some exceptions – suitable for settlement by white races, so far as the climate is concerned. The exceptions are the vicinity of the Zambesi itself, the desert and waterless coast regions of Damaraland, and a fairly wide belt of Portuguese territory on the East Coast. The whites are, however, incapable, save in a very limited degree, of performing the more arduous forms of manual labour. The actual development of the country, both agricultural and mineral, must depend therefore either upon African labour or upon imported Asiatic labour .... (Morel 1920, 29)

The assumption that whites could not clear bundu themselves, remove stones or plough land provokes many questions. Were white men not performing such tasks at that time in England, Ireland or America? Was it that colonial white men in particular were considered above such labour? Is Morel suggesting that white men's bodies were significantly weaker than those of black or Asian men? Was there an entrenched belief that white men could or should not perform such duties, 'the more arduous forms of manual labour'? Larger questions prompted by this seemingly anomalous statement in Morel's work may include how far any writer/observer can ever be free of the prejudices of the day. The second extract excites even more contestation:

For a century the healthy tablelands and plateaux of this region have been the scene of the kind of racial conflict which occurs when an invading race, of a higher culture than the aboriginal population and possessed of superior offensive and defensive weapons, disputes with the latter for the occupation of the land. Natural man presently finds himself threatened in his liberties. Civilised man<sup>3</sup> is filled with the terror which comes from the knowledge of overwhelming odds. Mutual fears inspire reciprocal cruelties. (ibid.)

The term 'of a higher culture' is laden with prejudices about Morel's own home country as well as what he terms 'aboriginal' people or 'natural man'. It seems not to have occurred to him, despite his friendship with Joseph Conrad and his knowledge of *Heart of darkness*, that white people such as Leopold of Belgium, Rhodes or Kurtz may be less cultured in their voracious and immoral search for wealth – whether in the form of rubber, diamonds or ivory – than the peoples who fall victim to their savage greed. Culture must arguably imply self-knowledge and self-control, not the possession of superior armaments. Those who invaded the Congo or Mashonaland cannot be classified as belonging to a higher culture. Their theft and exploitation of the land which had been inhabited by a peaceful, cultured people rather argues that the invaders were the savages. Schreiner is, more often than not, in accord with most of Morel's central tenets: to expose colonial depredation and inhuman exploitation. Yet she seldom makes the sort of errors noted in Morel's opening paragraphs to 'The story of Southern Rhodesia'. It is the concern of this article to ask why exactly she does not lapse into obnoxious assumptions about the cultural superiority of whites.

The argument is made here that her feminist perspective – an intuitive sensitivity to, and respect for, community – saves her from the blind-spots noted in Morel's landmark work.

Although she is, at first, an ardent supporter of Rhodes and his Charter Company, that affiliation soon gives way to a clear-sighted assessment of the darkness of Rhodes's heart. Schreiner watches his moral descent and laments the loss of a man who could have championed truth and light. Her first encounters elicit high praise for someone she hopes will bring the best, not the worst, of the West to the continent of Africa:

On Sunday morning Rhodes and Sivewright passed on their way back from Prince Albert. Rhodes came over to call on me. When Sivewright found he had slipped the leash, he came over in a great hurry and took him away saying the train was soon going. They need not fear me. ... I should like to see you working with Rhodes ... he is great and sincere himself; there is not a spot of hypocrisy in Rhodes; he never calls his diplomacy principle. 'My actions are policy, all policy' he says when you try to argue with him on any point; these other men who make capital out of principle become hypocrites when they play Rhodes's game. In a sense Rhodes is the sincerest human creature I know; he sees things direct without any veil. There is no man in the world to whom I could show myself as nakedly, and who can at times shows himself as nakedly to you .... (To W.P. Schreiner, Matjiesfontein, Tuesday, September 13, 1892)

Even this early enthusiasm for Rhodes is tempered by Schreiner's instinctively cautious wisdom: the phrase 'in a sense' qualifies blank endorsement of Rhodes, placing him in a morally parenthetical situation.

By 1896 her opinion of Rhodes had altered completely. Schreiner remembers how her first impression of him was through friends in England who told of his ten thousand pound donation for the upliftment of the Irish. She believed him to be equally benevolent towards black people in Africa, a prospective champion of liberty, but once she came to know his real interests, she felt disillusioned by him.

As long as he and I talked of books and scenery we were very happy, but when we began on politics and social questions, I found out to my astonishment that he had been misrepresented to me; especially when we got to the Native Question, we ended by having a big fight, and Rhodes getting very angry. All our subsequent meetings were of the same kind. ... we never met once without a royal fight. I have copies of all the letters I ever wrote him, and they are one long passionate endeavour to save him from what seemed to me the downward course. I have felt so terribly about him, when he was acting in a course that seemed to me most disastrously wrong – I have gone out of the House of Parliament when he was speaking, and written a note and hired a boy to take it over, imploring him to abstain from damning his soul as it seemed to me he was doing. With all his genius, with all his beautiful gifts, to see it going so! (To Rebecca Schreiner, February 1896)

The words 'damning his soul' may too easily be ignored as histrionic prose: they are in fact highly significant in the context of Schreiner's writing in *Peter Halket*; not so

much in an evangelical context as in a gendered sense. There she pictures Jesus talking to Halket. Christ, as the embodiment of compassion and justice, exposes to Halket the wrongs and cruelties of the Charter Company's activities in the terrain north of the Zambezi. Schreiner seldom appears overtly as the daughter of dour missionaries in her better-known writings which are generally praised for being avant-garde. In this reference to Rhodes's ethical suicide and spiritual damnation she speaks as a woman of conscience and a conscientised woman unable to witness the degradation of another's soul without speaking against such a perilous course. The phrase 'I felt so terribly about him' shows not so much judgement or any sense of a superior moral stance as it does a genuine anxiety, a loving concern or 'social mothering' about his choice of the wrong path and the waste of his rich talents (a biblical injunction). It seemed her insight into his degeneration was almost prophetic. Just two years later Schreiner hardly recognised Rhodes as he drove by, lifting his hat to her: he had 'such a miserable BLOATED HEAVY face ...' (To Frances Schreiner, 1898). By 1899, Schreiner had formalised the terms of her political polarity: her socialist cause was named and her opposition to capitalists such as Rhodes defined openly: 'It is this that makes our little struggle here something almost sacred, and of world-wide importance. Doornkop was a stab in the vitals of the international capitalist horde, from Rothschild and Rosebery to Rhodes and Harris'<sup>4</sup> (To J.C. Smuts, January 23, 1899).

Schreiner aligns elements of Christianity, the cause of liberal thought, women's rights and sexual enlightenment in a remarkable synthesis. In the same letter to Smuts she writes of the Boers' victory over British troops:

The average Boer fighting at Doornkop no doubt thought he was fighting for his little state, just as the Dutch of Holland, when in the 16<sup>th</sup> century they fought Philip, no doubt believed they were fighting merely to free their country from a tyrant, and had no idea they were leading in humanity's great fight for freedom of thought and enlightenment! God's soldiers sometimes fight on larger battlefields than they dream of. To me the Transvaal is now engaged in leading in a very small way in that vast battle which will during the twentieth century be fought out – probably most bitterly and successfully in America and Germany – between engorged capitalists and the citizens of different races. (ibid.)<sup>5</sup>

There are intimations here of both the world wars and the civil rights movement in the United States. Schreiner reaches such apparently prophetic vantage points by extrapolating correctly from her well observed analysis of the warring causes in the large tides of history. She seems to know instinctively where the centres of global convulsion are most likely to occur. In her vision of God's soldiers fighting on a larger battlefield than they realise, she speaks as the daughter of Victorian missionaries, yet in her mention of 'freedom of thought' she is the daughter of the future. Her uncanny apprehension of the significance of human actions in the world is grounded on a moral matrix as clearly and maturely drawn as that of another defender of the Boer cause, Emily Hobhouse.<sup>6</sup> Both women suffered for following the dictates of

conscience. In the short term, they were reviled and humiliated for their alliance with the downtrodden, but in the long term they have both emerged as heroines of feminist humanitarian consciousness. Schreiner asks for the women of the Transvaal Republic to be allowed to vote (and that in 1899): 'The only thing the Transvaal Government could do for me, would be to enfranchise all the wives and daughters of the Burgers, and who constitute the real back-bone of the country' (ibid.). This belief in women and the recognition of their knowledge of community defines Schreiner's sensibility and has granted her a unique, perennial place in libertarian thinking. Had Rhodes listened to her voice and allowed his own feminine voice of compassion for fellow human beings, black or Boer, to be heard within his conscience, many horrors committed in the name of Western Christianity and Britain could have been avoided in southern Africa.

Schreiner's parable of Peter Halket aimed to strike at the heart of Rhodes's ambitions to take over vast areas of central Africa unilaterally. Rhodes struck back, knowing that Schreiner's most sensitive area was her sense of justice. To hurt her as much as possible, he spread rumours that the Transvaal government had paid her to write *Peter Halket*. Schreiner was wounded:

Of all the lies Rhodes and his followers have spread about me none has cut me so deeply as the lie circulating in England that I received 4000 pounds from the Transvaal Government for writing *Peter Halket*. It cut straight at the use and value of what I have written and of what I may yet write. Further, the idea that an artist should for money set pen to paper and prostitute their intuitions by writing to order at all, is an accusation, in my eyes, far worse than murder. (ibid.)

The conflict between these two titanic intellectual forces of the time represented polarities at several levels: female versus male sensibilities; democratic versus autocratic agendas; socialist versus capitalist imperatives; altruistic versus egocentric impulses. In the political and ethical aspects of *Peter Halket*, the confrontation between the minds and priorities of these two individuals can be observed.

## TROOPER PETER HALKET OF MASHONALAND

Within Morel's own liberal intentions, his anomalous statements have already been noted. Yet this bifurcation can be observed in even greater detail in his inclusion of some questionable statements. Morel (1920, 31) cites, for instance, Lord Morley who describes the British treatment of indigenous races in southern Africa as follows: 'It is one of the most abominable chapters in the history of our times; one of the most abominable chapters in the history of our dealings with inferior races.'

Morley correctly classifies colonial activity in the region as 'abominable', but compromises his credibility as an enlightened liberal by his use of the adjective 'inferior'. What is more, it is surprising that Morel himself did not baulk at the phrase 'inferior races'. His inclusion of Morley's condemnation of racism mirrors, to some

extent, his own opening statements about white people not being expected to labour too hard, or his distinction between white people being civilised and of a higher culture than aboriginal inhabitants. There appears to be a dangerous identification of civilisation or 'higher culture' as the possession of superior arms or standards of living, rather than a coherent moral stance informing both individual behaviour and settled community. The definition of civilisation as strength or wealth is perilous: it can license the avaricious Westerner to appropriate the possessions and labour of others under the banner of being civilised or bringing civilisation. Livingstone's famous justification for exploration and infiltration into Africa under the three Cs of commerce, civilisation and Christianity was quickly debased. Commerce soon came to mean theft, as Morel revealed by logging the one-way trade from the Congo. Christianity was often used as a cover for repression, humiliation and erasure of inherited identity or ancient religious practice. Civilisation frequently implied or justified forced labour: as with the collection of rubber in the Congo or excavation for gold in Zimbabwe. Morel cites Earl Grey, writing in 1880: the statement is meant to characterise and criticise white colonial attitudes in South Africa at the time, yet it cannot be denied that the distinction between higher and lower races or the need for blacks to labour for whites, echoes some of Morel's (ibid, 30) own comments on whites being of a higher culture and unable to labour:

Throughout this part of the British Dominions the coloured people are generally looked upon by the Whites as an inferior race, whose interest ought to be systematically disregarded when they come into competition with their own, and who ought to be governed mainly with a view to the advantage of the superior race. And for this advantage two things are considered to be specially necessary: First, that facilities should be afforded to the White colonials for obtaining possession of land heretofore occupied by the native tribes; and secondly, that the kaffir population should be made to furnish as large and as cheap a supply of labour as possible.

This pattern was repeated exactly in the duping of Lobengula, the burning of his kraal, quick allocation of his lands to white confreres and subjugation of original owners as forced labourers on what was once their own soil:<sup>7</sup>

Forced labour, gradually assuming a more stringent and extensive character as the multifold requirements of the white men grew with the development of the 'farms' and mines, succeeded the conquest of the country. *The Bulawayo Chronicle* of February 22, 1896, recorded that: 'The Native Commissioners have done good work in procuring native labour. During the months of October, November and December they supplied to the mining and other industries in Matabeleland no less than 9,000 boys.' (ibid, 46)

Morel quotes the testimony of Mr. Carnegie, a missionary who summarised the condition of the Matabele: 'Our country is gone, our cattle have gone, our people are scattered, we have nothing to live for, our women are deserting us; the white man

does as he likes with them; we are the slaves of the white man, we are nobody and have no rights or laws of any kind' (ibid, 47).

Peter Halket, as we first meet him in the tale, appears to be one of the white men who do as they like with the local black women. He 'has' one 15-year-old girl, but does not 'fancy' her. He then spots a 30-year-old woman who captures his attention. She is already married to a black husband and has two children by him, but a white colonial has claimed her. In order to take her from this white, Halket buys up liquor when it is in short supply. He barter the black woman for some of the alcohol. Schreiner's feminist concerns are already perceptible in this initial account of Halket's values prior to his moral conversion on the kopje when Jesus appears to him. Schreiner reveals how callous and predatory Halket is about women by mimicking the language of Halket-as-typical-white-male.

'You got any girls?' said Peter. 'Care for niggers?'

'I love all women,' said the stranger, refolding his arms about his knees.

'Oh, you do, do you?' said Peter. 'Well, I'm pretty sick of them. I had bother enough with mine,' he said genially, warming his hands by the fire, and then interlocking the fingers and turning the palms towards the blaze as one who prepares to enjoy a good talk. 'One girl was only fifteen; I got her cheap from a policeman who was living with her, and she wasn't much. But the other, by Gad! I never saw another nigger like her; well set up, I tell you, and as straight as that—' said Peter, holding up his finger in the firelight. 'She was thirty if she was a day. Fellows don't generally fancy women that age; they like slips of girls. But I set my heart on her the day I saw her. She belonged to the chap I was with. He got her up north. There was a devil of a row about his getting her, too; she'd got a nigger husband and two children; didn't want to leave them, or some nonsense of that sort: you know what these niggers are? Well, I tried to get the other fellow to let me have her, but the devil a bit he would. I'd only got the other girl, and I didn't much fancy her; she was only a child. Well, I went down Umtali way and got a lot of liquor and stuff, and when I got back to camp I found them clean dried out. They hadn't had a drop of liquor in camp for ten days, and the rainy season coming on and no knowing when they'd get any. Well, I'd a vatje of Old Dop as high as that—,' indicating with his hand an object about two feet high, 'and the other fellow wanted to buy it from me. I knew two of that. I said I wanted it for myself. He offered me this, and he offered me that. At last I said, "Well, just to oblige you, I give you the vatje and you give me the girl!" And so he did.'

The difference between the plain prose of Jesus's respectful 'I love all women' and the dismissively macho/racist 'You got any girls?' or 'Care for niggers?' demarcates the unenlightened, unreflective appetite of the white predator from the *cor cordis* of He who loves universally and unconditionally. The asseverated bar-room style of the speech is replicated masterfully by Schreiner to capture the tone of butch bravado and male camaraderie typical of opportunist British soldiery of the day. But Schreiner has shown us earlier that this unappealing male speech pattern is a façade<sup>8</sup> and not the true character of Halket who has, deep within him, an unawakened conscience

and sensitivity, as evidenced by his reverie about happier times and memories of a kind mother who seems to call him back to humane values.<sup>9</sup>

He wondered first whether his mother would ever get the letter he had posted the week before, and whether it would be brought to her cottage or she would go to the post office to fetch it. And then, he fell to thinking of the little English village where he had been born, and where he had grown up. He saw his mother's fat white ducklings creep in and out under the gate, and waddle down to the little pond at the back of the yard; he saw the school house that he had hated so much as a boy, and from which he had so often run away to go a-fishing, or a-bird's-nesting. He saw the prints on the school house wall on which the afternoon sun used to shine when he was kept in; Jesus of Judea blessing the children, and one picture just over the door where he hung with his arms stretched out and the blood dropping from his feet.

This first intimation of the real Peter Halket adumbrates the inner humanity of many soldiers coarsened and dehumanised by warfare and the social dislocations caused by it. This gentle Peter is the man within, whom Jesus touches and recuperates in conscience and action. This reformed soul refuses to shoot the black prisoner the following day, releases him and is murdered for his refusal to share in white savagery. He, like Jesus, is a willing sacrifice. Memories of feminine kindness and humanity are re-awakened by Jesus's visitation and, in a profoundly moral and spiritual way, redeem him. Schreiner deftly equates colonialism with false maleness and opposes it with female compassion. Schreiner (1897:89) is trying to 'save' Rhodes, in both the ethical and spiritual sense, 'imploing him to abstain from damning his soul'. Her womanly care, or social mothering, is both sisterly and maternal. She mourns the loss of a good soul and endeavours to draw him back to fight for the cause of right. She can see the desire of yet greater wealth tempting him to reach for it at any moral cost and begs him to return to ethical accountability. 'At any moral cost' means the pillaging and theft of an entire country: Schreiner can foresee the consequences immediately. The picture of Halket's mother and her humble life, the 'fat ducklings' and domesticity of the little English village are in dramatic contrast to the high ambitions of great wealth from the colonies, gained by exploiting, abusing, maiming and killing the legal owners.<sup>10</sup> The need to go out to the colonies and do whatever had to be done by whatever means to raise a fortune is actuated by the desire to provide a life of luxury for his mother:<sup>11</sup>

He resolved he would make a great deal of money, and she should live with him. He would build a large house in the West End of London, the biggest that had ever been seen, and another in the country, and they should never work any more. ...

All men made money when they came to South Africa, – Barney Barnato, Rhodes – they all made money out of the country, eight millions, twelve millions, twenty-six millions, forty millions; why should not he!

Kurtz in *The heart of darkness* means to make a dazzling fortune to meet the demands of his fiancée's family and marry the woman he loves. A colony temptingly offers a chance of sudden wealth and social advancement: the same *mores* back home do not apply in a colony. Halket may attempt to take on the *persona* of a colonial brute who talks of 'niggers' and women as if they are possessions, but the core of his nature is too closely linked to plain village life for him to live out the swagger and cynicism of a tycoon. Jesus of Judea saves him from the temptation of grand West End life; in what became known as the 'Kaffir Circle' of London mansions for southern African magnates. Redemption takes place through a fireside colloquy by which Jesus softly questions the ambitions which threaten to lead Halket into the heart of darkness: killing, raping and pillaging.

'Now he's [Rhodes] death on niggers,' said Peter Halket, warming his hands by the fire; 'they say when he was Prime Minister down in the Colony he tried to pass a law that would give their masters and mistresses the right to have their servants flogged whenever they did anything they didn't like; but the other Englishmen wouldn't let him pass it. But here he can do what he likes. That's the reason some fellows don't want him to be sent away. They say, "If we get the British Government here, they'll be giving the niggers land to live on; and let them have the vote, and get civilised and educated, and all that sort of thing; but Cecil Rhodes, he'll keep their noses to the grindstone." 'I prefer land to niggers,' he says. They say he's going to parcel them out, and make them work on our lands whether they like it or not – just as good as having slaves, you know: and you haven't the bother of looking after them when they're old. Now, there I'm with Rhodes; I think it's an awfully good move. We don't come out here to work; it's all very well in England; but we've come here to make money, and how are we to make it, unless you get niggers to work for you, or start a syndicate? He's death on niggers, is Rhodes!' said Peter, meditating; 'they say if we had the British Government here and you were thrashing a nigger and something happened, there'd be an investigation, and all that sort of thing. But, with Cecil, it's all right, you can do what you like with the niggers, provided you don't get HIM into trouble.'

Rhodes wished to introduce the Strop Bill to allow the flogging of black employees, but Schreiner and many others opposed it. The use of forced labour, however, did come into being in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. The sentence 'We don't come out here to work; it's all very well in England' recalls Morel's own opening remarks in his 'Story of Southern Rhodesia': white people cannot be expected to labour 'in the most arduous ways'. Schreiner has Halket repeat the word 'niggers' both to mimic the language of Jameson and his cronies and expose the ease with which a standard village lad quickly adopts the inhuman vocabulary of his colonial master. Halket, mouthing typical settler language, fails to see why the British should be allowed to grant universal franchise to blacks: 'let them have the vote, and get civilised and educated and all that sort of thing'. It took another 60 years and international sanctions to force white settlers to allow black people to vote in their own country. The word 'civilised' is ironic in Achebe's sense: the rapacity and slaughter of innocent people

make it obvious that lazy white opportunists and fortune hunters were far more savage, like Kurtz, Rhodes and Leopold of Belgium, than Lobengula could conceive of. The statement 'I prefer land to niggers', though regarded by many as no more than a canard, has a ring of truth given the behaviour of settlers in Matabeleland or the spectre of the infamous 'hanging tree', with black men dangling in front of smug white spectators, used as the cover for Schreiner's *Peter Halket*. The established habit of amputating the hands<sup>12</sup> of those villagers in the Congo who failed to collect enough rubber disqualifies white colonials there from calling themselves civilised or possessing a higher culture: rather, they had descended to the horror of a personal hell; the kind that Schreiner could see Rhodes slipping into irretrievably.

Halket, however, is saved in various senses by his mountain-top revelation. The following day he refuses to kill the black man who is tied up. He will not cross the line that took Kurtz and Rhodes into a blazing inferno of moral decay and corruption. Halket steps back from the brink. He cannot pass over into the white savagery he is commanded to enter. He will not daub himself in the initiation rites of white barbarity. Jesus blesses him and leaves:

'Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you. Walk ever forward, looking not to the right hand or the left. Heed not what men shall say of you. Succour the oppressed; deliver the captive. If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he is athirst give him drink.'

A curious warmth and gladness stole over Peter Halket as he knelt; it was as, when a little child, his mother folded him to her: he saw nothing more about him but a soft bright light. Yet in it he heard a voice cry, 'Because thou hast loved mercy – and hated oppression –'

When Trooper Peter Halket raised himself, he saw the figure of the stranger passing from him. He cried, 'My Master, let me go with you.' But the figure did not turn. (1897:93)

Because the political parable of Halket appears at first reading to become more of a sermon, the tale never attains the critical significance of other works by Schreiner. Even today, there is little critical work on the text and it may well be that what seems to be the overtly religious character of it, makes closer scrutiny awkward or unpalatable to many researchers. The figure of Jesus may appear at first to be too prominent, but Schreiner needs it to scratch away any pretense of colonisation occurring for Christian purposes. Jesus, as she portrays Him, functions even more powerfully as figure of male/female equity. She strongly suggests that gender balance, sexual candour and wellbeing are correlated to individual probity, justice and balanced community living.<sup>13</sup> The corollary is that gender secrecy and imbalance in Rhodes are closely related to his compensatory impulses for grandiosity, power and seclusion.

The second half of the narrative, however, has all the tension and credibility, verve of dialogue and layers of association that mark out Schreiner's story-telling in its more recognisable form. Halket is a changed man: he will stand up for justice

and does so. All the bluster and false male-boasting have evaporated. Now he wishes to save the black prisoner. In a significant way, he has been feminised and thus humanised:

And off he started, telling us all the sins he'd ever committed; and he kept on, 'I'm an unlearned, ignorant man, Captain; but I must stand by this nigger; he's got no one else!' And then he says – 'If you let me take him [the prisoner] up to Lo Magundis, sir, I'm not afraid; and I'll tell the people there that it's not their land and their women that we want, it's them to be our brothers and love us. If you'll only let me go, sir, I'll go and make peace; give the man to me, sir!' The Colonial shook with laughter.

'What did the Captain say?' asked the Englishman.

'The Captain; well, you know the smallest thing sets him off swearing all round the world; but he just stood there with his arms hanging down at each side of him, and his eyes staring, and his face getting redder and redder: and all he could say was, "My Gawd! my Gawd!" I thought he'd burst. And Halket stood there looking straight in front of him, as though he didn't see a soul of us all there.'

'What did the Captain do?'

'Oh, as soon as Halket turned away he started swearing, but he got the tail of one oath hooked on to the head of another. It was nearly as good as Halket himself. And when he'd finished and got sane a bit, he said Halket was to walk up and down there all day and keep watch on the nigger. And he gave orders that if the big troop didn't come up tonight, that he was to be potted first thing in the morning, and that Halket was to shoot him.'

Halket refuses to shoot the black man who is tied up and defenseless. Instead, Halket releases him and is shot by the Captain:

'A pistol shot,' said the Englishman, closing the bosom.

'A pistol—'

The Englishman looked up at him with a keen light in his eye.

'I told you he would not kill that nigger. – See – here –' He took up the knife which had fallen from Peter Halket's grasp, and fitted it into a piece of the cut leather that lay on the earth.

'But you don't think—' The Colonial stared at him with wide open eyes; then he glanced round at the Captain's tent.

'Yes, I think that—Go and fetch his great-coat; we'll put him in it. If it is no use talking while a man is alive, it is no use talking when he is dead!'

They brought his great-coat, and they looked in the pockets to see if there was anything which might show where he had come from or who his friends were. But there was nothing in the pockets except an empty flask, and a leathern purse with two shillings in, and a little hand-made two-pointed cap.

So they wrapped Peter Halket up in his great-coat, and put the little cap on his head.

## CONCLUSION

Halket's ventriloquism, his initial mimicking of male-colonial stereotypes, gives way to the authentic, much quieter voice of a feminised and fundamentally enlightened person prepared to resist the initiation rites of white savagery. The extent and nature of this change are not necessarily ironic, as suggested by some critics, nor does the picture of Halket's mother's cottage have to be interpreted as subversive in nature if the Horatian tradition<sup>14</sup> is sustained as a coherent critique of the scale of the colossal: physically, in the monetary acquisitions of Rhodes, and metaphysically, in the false delusions of grandeur that warped Rhodes's perceptions of community and communal priorities. The figure of Jesus does not have to be a satire of religion if it is noted that Halket remembers how much Jesus's eyes remind him of his mother's. These three aspects, of ventriloquism, the Horatian tradition and Jesus's gentle gaze, all accord with a feminist reading of the text. Male egocentricity, solitariness, brutality and pomposity are exposed in Schreiner's parable. In contradistinction to the male *ius dominandi*, Schreiner upholds the alternative of female *ius vivendi*. At all times she sustains the hope of a fully human, feminised consciousness in the individual and in society as a whole.

Halket's tale is the exact, reverse image of Kurtz's: a man loses his life but saves his soul. Had the second half of the story formed the larger part and Jesus's intervention been veiled, the narrative might have been as signal as Conrad's. But then it would have lost its political actuality. Schreiner, in a sense, sacrifices fictional sublimity for a clear shot at Rhodes. Even in this sacrifice of fictional greatness or concern for it, in her larger interest for the immediate society in which she finds herself, Schreiner inscribes her socialist/feminist priorities. She seeks to be of use to those around her, more than she seeks greatness or monuments (such as the Rhodes Memorial). She wrote a diatribe against colonial male greed, blindness and misguided values, but the real tale is as much an *apologia* for the gentle sanity of Halket's mother and her gender as it is a woman's sober voice pleading with the most powerful man in Africa not to cross the line of civilised, humane behaviour: to invade neither Mashonaland/Matabeleland nor precipitate war against the Boer republics; not to descend into Kurtz's hell. The horrors of the concentration camps which decimated Boer women and innocent children by the thousand were the grisly outcome of Rhodes's refusal to listen to a woman's plea for kindness, compassion and restraint. He submitted, like Kurtz, or Faust, to the dazzling spectacle, the tantalus of diamonds and gold glittering before him: the end, he thought, justified the means. Halket's mother did not necessarily want a mansion in the West End: she wanted her son. Male prerogatives confuse the human bonds that women such as Schreiner or Woolf in *To the lighthouse*<sup>15</sup> or Eliot in *Silas Marner*<sup>16</sup> understand,

revere and embody in their writings. Schreiner regards Jesus as the complete human being because of his essential balance of male and female values:

Peter Halket threw two more logs on the fire. 'Do you know,' he said, 'I've been wondering ever since you came, who it was you reminded me of. It's my mother! You're not like her in the face, but when your eyes look at me it seems to me as if it was she looking at me. Curious, isn't it? I don't know you from Adam, and you've hardly spoken a word since you came; and yet I seem as if I'd known you all my life.' (1897:32)

When Rhodes or Kurtz dismiss or try in vain to repress their female selves, the quiet attention to the social bonds that construct life in community, they kill themselves from within, hardening and darkening their hearts. Schreiner's parable is a much more than a sermon which has been largely neglected because its overtly religious tenor makes it awkward in structure and uncomfortable to read. It is possible that its feminist argument may recuperate it and render the text as central to the anti-colonialist corpus, and possibly as significant in its own way as *Things fall apart* or *Heart of darkness*. Walters and Fogg (2010, 98) are correct to cite Paton whose perspicacity is remarkable here: 'Writing on *Trooper Peter* in the early 1980s, Alan Paton speculated on the work's survival in a future South Africa: "... if the miracle happens, if the new dispensation is established without recourse to extremes of violence, then *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* will remain an essential part of our literature and our history because it will explain many things that succeeding generations may otherwise find it difficult to understand"' .<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1. Julian Robert (2004) similarly mourned the brief discussion of *Peter Halket* in a review of Stanley's (2002) text.
2. This neglect in the book seems at odds with the existence of Stanley's (2000) own extensive, landmark article on *Trooper Peter Halket*. Stanley may have omitted fuller discussion of *Halket* in her book because of residual uncertainties of interpretation in her earlier article.
3. A.E. Coombes provides an invaluable perspective of the jingoistic male frenzy that overtook calm, humane judgement amongst the British public. She examines in detail the great exhibitions held in Britain at the time of the Matebele and Boer wars, to assess the desire to prove the superiority of British 'civilisation' over any other (the desire itself being an oxymoron of note). This is a far cry from the missionary zeal and justification for intervention in Africa given by men such as Livingstone. Coombes (1994, 102–103) writes: 'Throughout all the exhibitions from 1890 to 1913 is the feature which shows Africans locked in battle, either with each other or against a white, usually British, defendant. Despite the fact that there were many conflicts with British imperialism over parts of the Empire, the re-enactment of fights or battles are invariably African. The

focus of the event was the "inevitable" subjugation of the Africans involved.'

4. Rive notes, in his edition of the Letters, that this is a reference to 'Nathan Rothschild (1840–1915), created Baron Rothschild in 1885, head of the London branch of the Rothschild banking firm. Financial backing from Rothschild was crucial to Rhodes in establishing the supremacy of De Beers over its rivals and in launching the Chartered Company (Rive 1988, 345).
5. How far away Schreiner stands from general public opinion in Britain at the time is conveyed by Coombes (1994, 103). The Zulu ... is a warrior credited with outstanding bravery – an honourable characteristic, according to the ethics of the male British public school spirit – but doomed none the less to the category of 'uncivilised' because of the society's war-like resistance to the 'civilising mission'. While there may be many points of similarity between the Zulu and the Ndebele, the latter is constructed as a complete animal by 1899. There is no talk of 'evangelising' him as there is in the case of the Zulus. By this date, however, the Boer is fast approaching an equivalent to the Ndebele, although this is not yet directly stated. By 1901, the Military Exhibition turned the Boer into the prime butt of British antagonism, in the feature 'Boerland', and a cardboard model of the 'unkempt army of de Wet and that of the President, offer irresistible temptations to seize a rifle and perform deeds of valour oneself'.
6. Despite the scholarly value of Walters and Fogg's second article on *Halket*, there is a certain flippant tone to the writing which is initiated by the title itself 'The short, sorry tale of Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland and its frontispiece' and the last line allusion to *Hamlet*: 'the rest is silence'. When Schreiner is aligned with Emily Hobhouse, the gravity of their fight and their bravery in opposing British jingoism is at odds with this somewhat irreverent style. The tale is short but highly significant and by no means 'sorry' in any condescending sense of small or petty. There is a tone here of male insouciance.
7. Cf. Anzaldua in *La Frontera*. Anzaldua reveals the same pattern of deceitful settler appropriation: first theft of land and then exploitation of original owners for labour. Her own feminist manifesto accords closely with that of Schreiner: it is founded in an intuitive belief in kindness, gentleness and compassion – the life of peaceful community.
8. Cf. Ronnie Heaslop in *A passage to India*. His speech and manner change when in India and he begins to strut and adopt the unprepossessing machismo attitude of a sahib: 'India had developed sides of his character that she had never admired' (Forster 1986, 88). Both Heaslop and Halket are examples of ventriloquism: they are losing their own individual voices and being spoken through in the words of the colonial puppet-master.
9. Stanley (2000, 2010) considers the description of a rural cottage to be clichéd and sentimental: 'it pulls out all the sentimental stops'. She *assumes* Schreiner is being ironic, which is the only way such a bucolic emblem could be reconciled to her reading. She does not seem to be entirely aware of the ethical significance of the Horatian reference to humility or its established tradition (as traced, for instance, by Rostvig in *The happy man*). The rustic dwelling is short-hand for moral sobriety, considered essential in avoiding the sin of hubris. Rhodes's colonialist cravings represent a hubristic frenzy: that

fatal loss of humanity and ordinariness. The cottage therefore functions as an accurate and concise reference.

10. It is important to regard Schreiner in the context of numerous critics of British 'expansion' who comprise a fairly clear line from Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* to Thackeray in *Vanity fair*; both of these chronicle several of the exploitative aspects of colonial enterprise. Cf. Edward Said (1994, 112) on Austen in *Culture and imperialism*, and the reply from Ibn Warraq in *New English Review*, July 2007. Morel himself calls for a second Burke to expose iniquities in Africa.
11. An impulse which itself may be symptomatic of male hubris: the desire to 'make a woman into' a 'lady' indicates the wish not for a loving female companion in life, but for a lady as that most precious of male 'possessions'. A fortune, a mansion and a lady may be clues to the egocentric, unfeminised psyche of every male Pygmalion.
12. Pakenham, illustration opp. 501. Cf. Hochschild *passim*.
13. Cf. Schreiner's reading of Karl Pearson's *Sex and socialism*.
14. Cf. Schreiner to Edward Carpenter (1887, 5): 'When I have earned 40 pounds I am going to buy a tiny cottage somewhere in Switzerland with a garden and live there.' Schreiner's homes were always scrupulously plain, which reflected her moral imperative to live according to her own means an independent and useful life. The English cottage in her parable here is a touchstone of such modest and honest living.
15. In *To the lighthouse* Woolf contrasts male rapacity in the image of the brass beak with the communal picture of the dinner at which *boeuf en daube* is served by her mother. Her father's concern with the *Dictionary of national biography* tells of his concern for career and his reading of history in terms of achievement. Woolf questions conventional male views of historiography and suggests that the currents of daily life, chronicled by women, constitute as valid a history as the record of male battles and their great books.
16. Eliot shows the development of Silas from a lonely, embittered male hoarder to an adoptive father whose love for Eppie reconnects and feminises him within the larger community.
17. Quoted from its initial appearance in *Essays on South African literature in honour of Guy Butler* (Van Wyk Smith and MacLennan 1983, 34). In the essay after Paton's, Professor Beeton, a specialist on Schreiner, shows considerable insight by suggesting *Peter Halket* might best be read alongside 'A letter to the Jew' and *An English-South African's view of the situation* (Schreiner 1889).

## REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, G. 1999. *Borderlands*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Austen, J. 1963. *Mansfield Park*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Coombes, A. 1994. *Reinventing Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Forster, E.M. 1986. *A passage to India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Glover, J. 2004. Imperialism, labour and the new woman: Olive Schreiner's social theory. *English in Africa* 31(1)(May): 157–161.
- Hochschild, A. 1998. *King Leopold's ghost*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Morel, E.D. 1920. *The black man's burden*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Pakenham, T. 1991. *The scramble for Africa*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Rive, R., ed. 1988. *Olive Schreiner letters, Volume 1: 1871–1899*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robert, J. 2004. Review of *Imperialism, labour and the new woman: Olive Schreiner's Social Theory*. *Order* 10(Feb): 194.
- Rostvig, M-S. 1954. *The happy man: Studies in the metamorphoses of a classical ideal, 1600–1700*. Oslo: Akademisk Forlag.
- Said, E. 1994. *Culture and imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Schreiner, O. 1987. *Letters, Volume I: 1871–1899*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Schreiner, O. 1897. *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. Project Gutenberg 2008.
- Schreiner, O. 1889. *An English-South African's view of the situation: Words in season*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Stanley, L. 2000. Encountering the imperial and colonial past through Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket*. *Women's Writing* 7(2): 197–219.
- Stanley, L. 2002. *Imperialism, labour and the new woman: Olive Schreiner's social theory*. Durham: Sociology Press.
- Thackeray, W.M. 1994. *Vanity fair*. London: Norton.
- Van Wyk Smith, M. and D. MacLennan. 1983. *Essays on southern African literature in honour of Guy Butler*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Walters, P. and J. Fogg. 2007. Olive Schreiner in Rhodesia: An episode in a biography. *English in Africa* 34(2)(Oct): 93–109.
- Walters, P. and J. Fogg. 2010. The short sorry tale of Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland and its frontispiece. *English Studies in Africa* 53(2): 86–101.
- Warraq, I. 2007. Jane Austen and slavery. *New English Review*. [http://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm/frm/8722/sec\\_id/8722](http://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm/frm/8722/sec_id/8722) (accessed May 30, 2016).