Passion's 'Cumulative Poison': Colonial Desire and Friendship in Kipling's Early Fiction

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Abstract

In their speeches and writings, many British Victorian colonials raise concerns about the successful implementation of law and authority. Their anxiety resonates beyond imperial governments and legislative structures; it also questions the internal coherence of colonial rule. In interpreting this anxiety, I suggest in this paper that a conflict between desire and mastery prevailed on what I shall term Britain's 'colonial impulse to power'.
CHRISTOPHER LANE

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I Impurity and Expropriation: The Colonial Impulse to Power

Now, this is the road that the White Men tread
When they go to clean a land ...
Oh, well for the world when the White Men tread
Their highway side by side! - Kipling¹

A stone's throw out on either hand
From that well-ordered road we tread
And all the world is wild and strange. - Kipling²

It's curious the fascination that white men feel drilling queer material into shape. - Kipling³

In their speeches and writings, many British Victorian colonials raise concerns about the successful implementation of law and authority. Their anxiety resonates beyond imperial governments and legislative structures; it also questions the internal coherence of colonial rule.⁴ In interpreting this anxiety, I suggest in this paper that a conflict between desire and mastery prevailed on what I shall term Britain's 'colonial impulse to power'.

This oscillation between desire and mastery clarifies an uncertainty that surfaced in many colonial texts about how to inhabit and symbolize colonialism's political and psychic registers; it also foregrounds the drives and fantasies that propelled Britain's ongoing bid for global sovereignty. Kipling often referred to the 'breaking strain' that stymied his protagonists, for instance, when their national loyalty created intolerable fatigue and confusion over the precise meaning of their labour.⁵ Although this 'breaking strain' implies that acts of personal sacrifice glorified Britain's empire, many historians tell us that Britain's drive to secure political and economic sovereignty also intensified and sexualized relations between men, projecting antagonism and hostility onto those outside its franchise.⁶ Since Britain's colonial mastery
generated profound ambivalence toward its subjects, British women may have represented supports and vanishing mediators whose partial absence allowed forms of colonial mastery to prevail.

This account, however, is only one side of an uncertain and contested story. If Britain’s colonial power was as absolute and secure as its politicians maintained, how should we explain so many colonials’ suspicions that this power was not only vulnerable but also, on another level, already lost? This anxiety between colonizer and colonized, and between men and women, at the turn of the last century differed greatly from the full weight of Britain’s administrative power. It produces a paradox over the way that prominent colonials understood political instability at the level of ontological, group, and national fantasy, and the reason Britain’s authority turned on a nebulous and quite precarious hinge between external security and internal control.

Before we consider Kipling’s engagement with these psychic and rhetorical dilemmas, let us first turn to several prominent exemplars of colonial doubt: in his military speeches, for instance, Lord Horatio Kitchener — friend to Kipling, administrator in South Africa, political rival to the Viceroy of India, and discreet homosexual — considered this psychic rigidity a precondition for military success: ‘No soldier who is unable to exercise due restraint in these matters can expect to be entrusted with command over his comrades ... Every man can, by self-control, restrain the indulgence of these imprudent and reckless impulses that so often lead men astray’.7 Kitchener urged the soldier to examine and manage his ‘reckless impulses’ to prevent him from being ‘led astray’. When this policy failed, as it often did, Kitchener proposed genocide and brutal subjugation as the corrective for a paucity of domestic and internal control. Calls for askesis and sexual chastity influenced not only this ferocious and unappeasable command, but also the premise that the native would not submit to outside rule without evidence of the colonial’s self-restraint.8 Adopting this paradox of controlled violence, Kitchener considered the vigilant internal discipline of passions as a valuable quality for export.

Recent critics have documented the colonial perception of indigenous peoples as lawless, seditious, and sexually promiscuous; this work provides an impetus for my study here. However, critics have paid less attention to the dynamic that was integral to Britain’s ‘Empire of the Selfsame’,9 and have often framed this dynamic by appealing to historical events. Contrary to this single emphasis on historical materialism, I suggest that an unremitting dread of external defiance and internal unmaking propelled Britain’s drive for global mastery; that the unappeasable quality of this drive created a fervent ambition that many colonialists tried unsuccessfully to temper and vindicate by ethical appeals.

Let us consider more examples to support this claim: Robert
Needham Cust, a civilian who served in the Punjab in the 1850s and '60s, acknowledged that 'the first sweet taste of unbounded power for good over others, the joy of working out one's own design, the contagious pleasure of influencing hundreds, the new dignity of independence, the novelty of Rule and swift obedience, this and the worship of nature in the solemnity of its grandeur and the simplicity of its children, were the fascinations which had enchanted me'.

Henry Lawrence, who directed many of Britain's contemporaneous policies in the Punjab, elaborated on this point without appearing to jeopardize his command's authority: 'It is all nonsense, sticking to rules and formalities, and reporting on foolscap paper, when you ought to be on the heels of a body of marauders, far within their own fastness, or riding into the villages and glens consoling, coaxing, or bullying as it may be, the wild inhabitants'. Finally, consider the words of James Fitzjames Stephen, an influential imperialist of the time (and Virginia Woolf's paternal uncle), for his sentiment influenced Kipling's later demands for colonial appropriation: 'The sum and substance of what we have to teach them [amount to] the gospel of the English ... It is a compulsory gospel which admits of no dissent and no disobedience ... If it should lose its essential unity of purpose, and fall into hands either weak or unfaithful, chaos would come again like a flood'.

Despite the confidence of these statements, each appears haunted by anxiety that a counterforce can unmake and usurp their authority from within. We could describe this force as colonial jouissance since it underpins each declaration and dissipates labour and power. Considering the full influence of this counterforce, we also might argue that it obliged the colonial to compete with a corresponding impulse to self-dispossession whenever he bid for a country's possession. Thus the anxiety fueling the colonial's ambition to possess a country may have precipitated a significant number of internal crises for the colonial and his administration.

Since masculine rigour seemed amenable to channeling discipline into an incitement to power, many colonialists deemed it a suitable force to check these destructive impulses. For instance, Fitzjames Stephen gendered force as the expression of resolute masculinity: 'Strength in all its forms is life and manhood. To be less strong is to be less of a man, whatever else you may be'. However, Stephen never clarified the referents to this 'whatever else'; they conflict with central axioms of colonial masculinity.

These examples demonstrate that by the time Kipling came to theorize imperialism, inexorable laws of progress, hierarchy, and evolution appeared to determine the foundational logic of Britain's empire, presenting 'mankind' as the governor of Nature's ordinance: 'Nothing is gained by coddling weak and primitive men. The law of survival applies to races as well as to the species of animals. It is pure
sentimental bosh to say that Africa belongs to a lot of naked blacks. It belongs to the race that can make the best use of it. I am for the white man and the English race’. This appeal to natural law generated a frame of categories and roles able to prescribe acceptable behaviour by condemning their infraction. The law seemingly resolved the problem of antagonistic and self-destructive drives by fostering an ideal by which to measure the subject’s deficient relation to each political mandate. Kipling’s imperial law established a ‘transcendental signifier’ against which to defend the Empire from the manifest dissent and chaos of its unruly impulses.

Kipling often connected this anxiety with the process of writing and the general production and dissemination of colonial meaning; his fiction relies on an analogous injunction to expel all of its detrimental elements. Kipling termed this radical excision ‘Higher Editing’; he sought to leave only a text’s essential elements: ‘A tale from which pieces have been raked out is like a fire that has been poked’. However, Kipling’s attempt to reduce the proliferation of meaning in his narratives inadvertently produced an elliptical and ‘modernist’ style that stressed allusion, inference, and interpretation as a means to withstand ‘the pressure of the absent’. Additionally, the excised is never absent in Kipling’s writing; the pressure of a ‘burden incommunicable’ amplifies the precise limits of his narrative control.

In the opening sentence of a description of his ‘Working-Tools’, for instance, Kipling argues that ‘Every man must be his own law in his own work’. The narrator of ‘False Dawn’ later demonstrates the practical impossibility of this ideal: ‘No man will ever know the exact truth of this story ... so the tale must be told from the outside - in the dark - all wrong’ (p. 67).

With its appeal to law over desire’s vicissitudes, Kipling’s writing mirrors a defensive structure that tries to expel sexual intimacy and miscegenation from the text; this attempt repeatedly surfaces and fails in the following reading of *The Light That Failed* (1891). Benita Parry foregrounds Kipling’s reliance on parataxis, for instance, arguing that the trope ‘organizes incommensurable discourses in ways that obscure and conceal the antagonism of their ideas’. The brevity of Kipling’s fictional endings indicates the urgency with which he tried to disband the shattering chaos of desire; this brevity also foregrounds anxious moments of colonial authority by displaying his tenuous control over the text’s periphery. Kipling’s ‘nostalgia for a center’ often manifests as an extensive fraternal diaspora, for instance, that relieves the uncertainty of ‘race’ by promising a reprieve from horrific formlessness: solidarity among white men provides at least imaginary defense against ‘impure’ elements of racial difference and sexual desire. Yet Kipling’s fiction is never stable in this regard because the displacement of ‘impurities’ compels them to haunt their original structure. Let us
therefore examine this difficulty of desire, and its uncertain resolution, in one of Kipling’s most interesting narrative failures.

II  The Aim of Desire and The Passion That Fails

He must be a man of decent height,
He must be a man of weight,
He must come home on a Saturday night
In a thoroughly sober state;
He must know how to love me,
And he must know how to kiss;
And if he’s enough to keep us both
I can’t refuse him bliss – Kipling²³

He was beginning to learn, not for the first time in his experience, that kissing is a cumulative poison. The more you get of it, the more you want. – p.182

There are many lies in the world, and not a few liars, but there are no liars like our bodies, except it be the sensations of our bodies. – Kipling²⁴

Critics generally condemn Kipling’s first novel, The Light That Failed (1891), as a lamentable failure. While enigma and thematic irresolution riddle the work, the narrative splits between two remarkable and dissimilar endings. In the first, the protagonist Dick Heldar dies in the arms of his closest male friend, Torpenhow; in the second, amended version, Heldar forms a precipitous marriage to Maisie, a woman who has from the novel’s outset expressed almost unmitigated hostility toward him. The narrator previously emphasized her uninterest in Heldar because their artistic rivalry disrupts the ensuing romantic attachment, creating an agony of unrequited love. Although neither version is successful in realist terms, Kipling preferred the first but proffered the second as a hasty revision to renew the interest of his disaffected readers.

This revision is incongruous because Maisie’s abrupt change of heart and spontaneous repentance contradict the narrator’s emphasis on her and Heldar’s incommensurate demands. On the one hand, the narrator censures Maisie’s preoccupation with painting as a selfish disregard for her ‘suitor’s’ plight. On the other, her resistance is central to the narrative because it upholds the novel’s basic concerns: the relentless unpleasure of Heldar’s creativity, the extent to which he succeeds in convincing himself (if not the reader) of his passion for an ‘unworthy’ woman, and the self-destructive impulses that represent all heterosexual interest in the novel.²⁵ Maisie embodies all of these themes because the novel projects her as the reprehensible cause of Heldar’s misery.

In this respect, the novel’s split between two endings is not an
exception to, but rather an emblem of, a wider narrative difficulty: the split documents the novel’s resistance to sexual desire. *The Light That Failed* represents a crisis of object choice for which the classic scenario of the unavailable woman – and her conventional indictment – seems inadequate to explain its failure.\(^{26}\) Maisie and other women in the text are recipients of an embittered misogyny, but the antagonism of desire that beleaguered Heldar not only precedes his involvement with Maisie, but also transforms her lack of interest into a conflict to which she has no obvious connection.

Thus, the text follows a split in Heldar between his desire’s aim and the object that receives it – the object which he considers its *cause* – although his desire’s character falls elsewhere, within the purview of masculine relations, and particularly the arms of one man whose attraction prevails throughout. We can attribute many critics’ complaints about this text’s flaccidity to a conflict between aim, desire, and object because the text exists irrespective of Kipling’s metaphysical explanation for Heldar’s despondency and the author’s misogynist rejection of women as the principal cause of Heldar’s misery. The phrase ‘spoilt my aim’ for instance, recurs in this text (pp. 10, 11-12, 14, 206), as an example and symptom of Heldar’s psychic impotence and a precursor to his eventual blindness – an illness that stages his need for Torpenhow’s specular assistance for him to focus on what he otherwise cannot see about his desire.

We can further illustrate Heldar’s dilemma by the significance he attaches to kissing.\(^{27}\) His obsession with Maisie begins – like Philip Carey’s similarly hopeless ‘demand’ for Mildred Rogers in W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1915) – from an apparent lack of intimacy. Their first kiss occurs after his gun has misfired, its aim spoilt: ‘Considered as a kiss, that was a failure, but ... it was the first’ (p. 13). By granting Heldar only one kiss, Maisie makes each request exorbitant, leaving Heldar furious and later incapacitated by its ‘cumulative poison’ (p. 182); the demand always exceeds her response – and, one might suggest, his need. While Maisie constrains oral gratification in *The Light That Failed*, several bizarre and equivalent incidents represent this pleasure between men and between women. For instance, Heldar and Torpenhow hear the refrain from the musical – cited as an epigraph to this section – during their reuniting walk. Although the narrative curiously disembodies this stanza, it is not, as Kipling claims, a ‘music-hall refrain’ (p. 141), but rather an example of his own verse whose inclusion gives this scene particular significance: it encourages Heldar to sign up for military service, though the narrator never explains why a regiment of men would sing their desire for a man who ‘must know how to love me;/ And he must know how to kiss;/ And if he’s enough to keep us both/ I can’t refuse him bliss’ (p. 141). Later, Heldar receives an unsolicited kiss from a female
acquaintance and comments, as if to reiterate this refrain: "The amount of kissing lately has been simply scandalous. I shall expect Torp to kiss me next" (p. 196). In fact, this homosexual possibility recurs throughout Kipling's work as the most feasible limit – or *point ad absurdum* – to same-gender contact. To put this issue another way, we could say that it recurs as the jocular expression of a wish that expands one man's affectionate interest for another, from the specific concerns of object choice to the generic field of homophilia. Thus Mulvaney, in 'With the Main Guard', reports a soldier's comment to his officer as follows: 'The Staff Or'cer wint blue, an' Toomey makes him pink by changing to the voice ov a minowerdin' woman an' sayin': "'Come an' kiss me, Major dear, for me husband's at the wars an' I'm all alone at the Depot"'. Similar and unaccountable homoerotic rejoinders punctuate Kipling's short story 'Love-o'-Women': 'He might as well have said that he was dancing naked', comments Mulvaney to Ortheris incongruously to explain his sergeant's behaviour. Mackenzie later declares of another soldier: 'I knew there was no callin' a man to account for his tempers. He might as well ha' kissed me' (p. 184).

Heldar’s remarks about the scandal of kissing therefore are not exceptional to Kipling's economy of masculine desire; they are arguably that desire's most logical epiphany. Heterosexual desire characteristically disrupts the intimacy that men foster for each other, compelling same-sex friendship (or homophilia) bitterly to engage with the 'disloyalty' that cross-gender interest precipitates. When Heldar's obsession with Maisie seems most chaotic and self-destructive, for instance, his relationships with men begin to fracture; in turn, they insist that he remain faithful to their group – masculine loyalty ensures his salvation. Fraternal bonding is thus a redemptive camaraderie against the debilitating influence of women: "But a woman can be-" began Dick unguardedly. "A piece of one's life", continued Torpenhow. "No, she can't" (p. 103).

The idea that intimacy with women can destroy Heldar's creative talent is consistent with this paradigm; such intimacy creates an instability that threatens all of his male friendships. Heldar's relationship with Torpenhow is contrary to this impulse, however, because it fosters creative talent and psychic stability, generating a productive cohesion between 'sublimation', group loyalty, and self-discipline. As the narrator remarks of this split between male and female objects:

Torpenhow came into the studio at dusk, and looked at Dick with eyes full of the austere love that springs up between men who have tugged at the same oar together and are yoked by custom and use and the intimacies of toil. This is a good love and, since it allows, and even encourages strife, recrimination, and the most brutal sincerity, does not die, but increases, and is proof against any absence and evil conduct. (p. 58)
If love between men is 'good' when it is 'austere', shaped by 'the intimacies of toil', and able to ward off women's 'evil conduct', heterosexual love tortures Heldar because it frustrates his pursuit of 'higher' goals. Homophilia is thus regenerate, pure, and sublime, while heterosexuality is degenerate, impure, and abject. The narrator corrects any assumption that women's 'evil conduct' is merely an external threat; woman's repression also prevents fraternal bonding from corrupting philia into eros. As an appropriate analogy here, Freud argued that the 'Primal Horde' of brothers had to maintain a similarly vigilant 'esprit de corps' against the legacy of their presocial and homosexual barbarism.31

Heldar's defense cannot properly excise evil conduct or comply with the colonial demand for askesis, however; neither painting nor the regiment can draw off the remainder to this novel's desire. Instead, the desire tips first toward a 'bad' love for Maisie and then, with less compulsion and self-destruction, toward a 'love' – that is, approval, respect, and unshakable loyalty – for Torpenhow. Even this figure of salvation cannot foreclose a demand for physical contact; he represents this demand with additional intensity:

'Steady, Dickie, steady!' said the deep voice in his ear, and the grip tightened. 'Bite on the bullet, old man, and don't let them think you're afraid.' The grip could draw no closer. Both men were breathing heavily. Dick threw his head from side to side and groaned.

'Let me go', he panted. 'You're cracking my ribs. We – we mustn't let them think we're afraid, must we – all the powers of darkness and that lot?'

'Lie down. It's all over now.'

'Yes', said Dick obediently. 'But would you mind letting me hold your hand? I feel as if I wanted something to hold on to. One drops through the dark so'.

Torpenhow thrust out a large and hairy paw from the long chair. Dick clutched it tightly, and in half an hour had fallen asleep. Torpenhow withdrew his hand, and, stooping over Dick, kissed him lightly on the forehead, as men do sometimes kiss a wounded comrade in the hour of death, to ease his departure. (pp. 137-38)32

The first version of the novel seems to be this passage's logical epiphany because the aim of Heldar's desire finally reaches its object – another man – when Heldar collapses and dies in Torpenhow's arms. In this ending's revised version, however, Kipling recasts intimacy between the two men as a passionate friendship, while an alternative path – love between women – seems to replace this unwritable fantasy. The substitution of lesbianism for male homosexuality was a frequent trope of the Art Deco movement two decades later; as I have argued elsewhere, Ronald Firbank adopted this trope throughout his fiction for similar reasons.33 In The Light That Failed, 'the love which dare not speak its name'34 also emerges from another sexual scene as desire for Maisie from the unnamed 'red-haired girl'. Here, we see a similar
displacement of heterosexuality by homophilia because the 'red-haired girl' previously was a sexual rival with Maisie for Dick. It appears, then, that the second ending was the narrative solution to what Heldar and Maisie heterosexually resist, and what Heldar and Torpenhow find homosexually impossible: 'The red-haired girl drew her [Maisie] into the studio for a moment and kissed her hurriedly. Maisie's eyebrows climbed to the top of her forehead; she was altogether unused to these demonstrations. "Mind my hat," she said, hurrying away, and ran down the steps to Dick waiting by the hansom' (p. 68).

As with the earlier question about the musical sung by the passing regiment, the narrator does not comment on this incident, though it fulfills an important function in this novel. The narrator does not name or develop the 'red-haired girl' as a character, though she models for Maisie's painting, so her presence encourages a mild form of sexual rivalry between Heldar and Maisie for the same woman, and between Maisie and she for the same man (Dick). The 'red-haired girl' also voices an agony of homosexual longing, as if representing the displaced expression of an impossible love between Heldar and Torpenhow. Having kissed Maisie, for instance, she erupts at her cleaner with unaccountable rage: 'The woman fled, and the red-haired girl looked at her own reflection in the glass for an instant and covered her face with her hands. It was as though she had shouted some shameless secret aloud' (p. 72). Although we last hear the 'red-haired girl' urging, 'Maisie, come to bed' (p. 150) – Maisie's inability to sleep results from her insoluble relation to Heldar – the persistent cultural disavowal of women's sexual desire in late-Victorian friendships suggests that this incident does not intentionally signify lesbianism. However, it does indicate a link between an impulse and the desired object at the close of The Light That Failed that is equivalent to the two men's final embrace and consistent with homophilia's exchange for marriage's conventional resolution in its revised ending.

This secondary 'lesbian' relationship displaces erotic interest between Heldar and Torpenhow by representing their intimacy as a defense against women's 'cumulative poison' (p. 182). For instance, Heldar's life improves when he relinquishes his obsession for Maisie, and it coheres entirely when he returns to the brotherly fold. Having pursued Torpenhow to the Sudan for military service, Heldar also finds the inspiration to paint scenes of war, while the company of men re-solders his life's disparate aims, leaving him 'wild with delight at the sounds and the smells [of war]' (p. 201). The narrative implies that his regiment is reparative in psychic terms because it gives him purpose instead of abjection and reassurance after hopeless instability: 'The clank of bayonets being unfixed made Dick's nostrils quiver ... "Oh, my men! - my beautiful men!"' (p. 141). Since this reintegration takes place abroad, in military conflict and by the death of 'Fuzzies' (Sudanese
soldiers), it also indicates what is at stake in each narrative and psychic pattern of expurgation: war allows Heldar to feel 'master of himself' (p. 196) and 'good to be alive again!' (p. 192). Since one of this text's most distressing and inexplicable scenes is the recollection of an incident in which Heldar and Torpenhow happily ridicule the death of a Sudanese soldier, Heldar's epiphany and ritualized purification are also the grotesque effect of colonial subjection and racial slaughter:

Then came to his mind the memory of a quaint scene in the Sudan. A soldier had been nearly hacked in two by a broad-bladed Arab spear. For one instant the man felt no pain. Looking down, he saw that his life-blood was going from him. The stupid bewilderment on his face was so intensely comic that both Dick and Torpenhow, still panting and unstrung from a fight for life, had roared with laughter, in which the man seemed as if he would join, but, as his lips parted in a sheepish grin, the agony of death came upon him, and he pitched grunting at their feet. Dick laughed again, remembering the horror. It seemed so exactly like his own case. (pp. 126-27)

With the exception of Kipling's most recent biographer, Martin Seymour-Smith, who claims that this scene 'has power as a true metaphor of how Kipling felt', critics have thoroughly condemned Kipling's passage. Notwithstanding the problem of 'true metaphor', it is imperative to ask why Kipling's metaphor took this form in establishing an analogy between his depression and his fantasies of racial violence. For other critics, Heldar's memory indicts British barbarity by enlisting the death of a Sudanese man as a source of pleasure and contemptuous laughter for white men. The idea that 'stupid bewilderment' could be 'intensely comic', that being 'hacked in two' would produce a 'sheepish grin', and that 'the agony of death' could bolster the memory of a 'quaint scene' is itself so obscene that it has impeded further inquiry. However, the argument that this scene illustrates only Kipling's callous indifference seems inadequate in this context; the link between humiliation and mirth — and that the respondents are virilized and sexualized by their laughter — demonstrates the jouissance maintaining their intimacy as it fuels their fascistic bid for power. 38

A less extreme, if no less racist, example of projection arises before Heldar returns to the army, when he considers the inspiration for one of his paintings — the portrait of a woman he began during a sea voyage from Lima to Auckland; her image configures every conceivable fantasy and prejudice: 'She was a sort of Negroid-Jewess-Cuban; with morals to match ... who served as the model for the devils and the angels both — sea-devils and sea-angels, and the soul drowned between them' (p. 98). Following the topography of E. M. Forster's short story 'The Other Boat' (1915-16), which I have interpreted elsewhere, Heldar produces the painting 'on the lower deck' (p. 98) to signify difficult and inaccessible fantasies, and to allow the woman to figure desires that
seem unwritable elsewhere. Since femininity and race condense a threat that Heldar flees, I suggest that this ‘Negroid-Jewess-Cuban’ also embodies The Light That Failed’s narrative logic by compelling Heldar’s return to the army and Torpenhow. The spectacle of the grotesquely mutilated Sudanese soldier indicates the violence that is necessary to represent – and then annihilate – each ‘opposition’, whether it amplifies concerns about gender, race, or both. By adopting a principle of permanent antagonism, the ‘Empire of the Selfsame’ uses defensive structures to purify its center and unify its diffuse impulses. As The Light That Failed illustrates, however, this antagonism returns desire to itself, keeping it within the apparent safety and security of an enclosure that admits no alterity. Less by intent than by default, this enclosure also creates a reactive homoeroticism: the empire manifests an erotics of the ‘same’ rather than sexual desire for one man whom other men perceive differently. In this way, the novel promotes the idea that masculine imperialism glorifies phallic power and authority without resonating entirely of homosexuality. The novel eroticizes Torpenhow, for instance, because he represents an ideal whose physical realization never occurs. The narrative impedes the expression of Heldar’s palpable desire for him, using the principle of de-eroticized friendship to withstand the pressure of this ‘burden incommunicable’. As the publication history of this novel testifies, however, the text could not sustain this ideal; it tried instead to resolve this ideal by writing first the suicide of its protagonist, then Maisie’s marital conversion in a way that disbands Kipling’s primary support for homophilia. Kipling’s decision to leave The Light That Failed heterosexually ‘secure’ is thus contrary to the fundamental erotic path of this novel. Generally, however, he privileged the austere ‘rigour’ of colonial masculinity over the debilitating effects of marriage and the effeminacy he perceived the Victorian dandy as embodying. As he declared in the poem ‘In Partibus’, in a passage that attests to the impetus of most of his other writing:

It’s Oh to meet an Army man,
Set up, and trimmed and taut,
Who does not spout hashed libraries
Or think the next man’s thought
And walks as though he owned himself,
And hogs his bristles short.41

NOTES

This essay is reprinted with permission from chapter one of The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire, © (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

1. Rudyard Kipling, ‘A Song of the White Men’, Rudyard Kipling’s Verse:

2. Kipling, epigraph to ‘In the House of Suddhoo’, Plain Tales from the Hills ([1890]; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 143. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


7. Lord Horatio Kitchener, qtd. in Wurgaft, The Imperial Imagination, pp. 10-11.


11. Henry Lawrence, qtd. in Sir Herbert Edwardes and Herman Merivale, Life of Sir Henry Lawrence, Vol. II (London: Smith, Elder, 1872), p. 219. His equally fanatical brother, Walter, spoke of the delusion surrounding this self-aggrandizement, and the danger of its coercive practices: ‘Our life in India, our very work more or less, rests on illusion. I had the illusion, wherever I was, that I was infallible and invulnerable in my dealing with Indians. How else could I have dealt with angry mobs, with cholera-stricken masses, and with processions of religious fanatics? It was not conceit, Heaven knows: it was not the prestige of the British Raj, but it was the illusion which is in the very air of India ... They, the millions, made us believe we had a divine mission. We made them believe we were right’. See Walter Lawrence, The India We Served (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1929), pp. 42-43.


13. The term refers to drives that are ineffable, but still palpable, in these texts.


23. Kipling, *The Light That Failed* ([1891]; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 141. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


25. Heldar's model, Bessie, is drawn to Torpenhow, though he does not reciprocate the interest; it causes him considerable discomfort. He later follows Heldar's advice and flees from her, only later returning to ignore her entirely:

He went to the mantelpiece, buried his head on his arms, and groaned like a wounded bull ... 'Out you go immediately. Never resist the devil ... Fly from him. Pack your things and go'. 'I believe you are right. Where shall I go?' 'Pack first and inquire afterwards.' (p. 121)


32. John M. Lyon correctly observes in his introduction to the Penguin edition that the passage is 'mawkish' – indeed all physical intimacy, and any formulation of sexuality by Kipling, shares this quality – though Lyon is strangely adamant that the relationship between Heldar and Torpenhow is 'not homoerotic' (p. xxiii). The passage, however, speaks for itself. Other Kipling critics, such as Mark Kinead-Weekes ('Vision in Kipling's Novels', *Kipling's Mind and Art*, ed., Andrew Rutherford [London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964], pp. 197-234) and Martin Seymour-Smith in his recent biography (*Rudyard Kipling* [London: Queen Anne, 1989], pp. 163-90) are less reluctant to consider its influence. Kinead-Weekes argues: 'In that most significant eighth chapter, male friendship and the life of action are directly opposed to the love of Maisie and the hope of marriage' (p. 206).


37. Seymour-Smith, *Rudyard Kipling*, p. 188.

38. Though it is abhorrent to consider that Kipling's readers identified with their mirth, Robert Buchanan's famous indictment of Kipling shows there was dissent and reproach toward this violence at the time. See Robert Buchanan, 'The Voice of the Hooligan', *Contemporary Review*, 76 (1899), pp. 775-89.

