

The Formations of Masculinities

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Horlacher, Stefan, ed. *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*. DQR Studies in Literature 58. Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015. viii + 318 pages. ISBN 978-90-04-29899-6. Hb. \$106.

Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice is the 58th edited volume of the well-known *DQR (Dutch Quarterly Review)* Studies in Literature series, which has always been concerned to provide academics with up-to-date research materials from various backgrounds. This particular edition in the series embraces the field of gender studies by involving several related research fields including law studies, cultural studies, literary studies and, most importantly, masculinity studies. The authors of the essays employ different types of analysis; owing to the various approaches and methodologies, the book is suitable for readers who, to some extent, are already familiar with the basic terminology of masculinity studies. It must be noted, however—highlighting the editor's, Stefan Horlacher's expertise (Dresden University of Technology, Chair of English Literature)—that the edition is structured in a manner that, firstly, explains the basic glossary of masculinity studies; and secondly, it provides the congruent theoretical, philosophical, and historical background, paying careful attention to the importance of feminism. The book contains thirteen articles and, although it is not divided into sections, its structure can clearly be separated into three segments: theoretical, classical, and contemporary literature.

The book's incontrovertible account is the successful establishment of a liaising discourse between different theoretical and cultural reading practices from the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, while employing an analytical approach to this relatively young research field. This essay collection addresses the question how men find themselves at a loss for an adequate terminology that could support them to "speak" about themselves as men. There is, however, an ambivalence, an attitude that lies in the self-conscious manner in which men could have grasped their gender identity, since the mere act of speaking about it would indicate that the given subject has failed to live up to the "ideal" of patriarchy. This leads to a masculinity crisis which entails an existential crisis as well. These problems are openly explored by the articles of this volume.

In his introduction, Horlacher elaborates on the double focus of the volume—as he distinguishes the theoretical and literary analysis parts only—

pointing out that its implied audience comprises scholars of both masculinity studies theory and British literary theory, which, not coincidentally, are also areas in which he has published. The first part contains three articles that support and complement each other both theoretically and contextually, making up the most outstanding and coherent section of the book. Todd W. Reeser, Raewyn Connell, and Richard Collier give detailed conceptualizations to the term “masculinity,” while highlighting its importance as a separate set of social and discursive practices.

Reeser provides readers with a brief history of the birth of masculinity studies, showing how this new discipline claimed its own right to become a separate research field in academia. Furthermore, he discusses the problematic re-constructive processes of the masculine subject by arguing that the characteristics and perceptions behind the concept are “shared ideas about what a man is or ought to be” (14). Reeser also uses Connell’s term of “hegemonic masculinity” to deepen the explanation about power relations. By using this notion, he elegantly lays the groundwork for Connell’s article, which gives an exact definition of the term: “by ‘masculinity’ I mean the pattern or configuration of social practices linked to the position of men in the gender order, and socially distinguished from practices linked to the position of women” (40). This definition hovers above all the other articles, while also formulating the question: “what might change men’s attachment to patriarchal society” (49). In the third article, Collier analyzes the connection between men, law, and gender, arguing that certain taken-for-granted ideas about the legislation of masculinity have been affected by various cultural and societal changes. Collier also applies the notion of hegemonic masculinity and questions its profitability for all men. These three articles raise not only important issues of masculinity studies but also portray a brief overview of theorized and applied criticism, delineating the most important effects separate periods had on the institutionalization of this field.

The second section contains texts from various periods, including the English Renaissance and the Enlightenment. These articles treat literary texts as a “privileged space and epistemological medium” (5), where discursive practices help study the ever-formulating constructions of masculinities. Still, the common feature of these periods is that each of them had relatively clear ideas of what a man should be—both in public and private spheres of society—and what types of virtues one should adopt to become an accepted figure.

The second section, including the essays of Christoph Houswitschka, Mark Bracher, Rainer Emig, and Horlacher, is rather well structured, and

offers close readings of the texts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, reflecting on how different periods tried to normalize standardize women and men in their gender roles. Therefore, the heteronormative distinction of genders characterizes literary works of the discussed periods. The four chapters analyze this distinctness, re-reading canonical texts from the perspective of masculinity studies. The authors highlight that masculinity constructions, regardless of the given historical or cultural period, have always been conditioned to fit into the apparent normative value-system. These literary texts are classical representatives of their ages, therefore, re-reading them by using a different analytical model may help literary historians, theoreticians, and readers alike to acquire a more thorough understanding of various cultural periods' perceptions of gender.

Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1485), the best known work of Arthurian literature, is crucial from the perspective of masculinity constructions since, in Houswitschka's analysis, these constructions are established and formulated in a rigorous system of values, beliefs, and oaths in which knights had to prove their loyalty to the king. Houswitschka emphasizes that in Malory's work the male body, besides being the bearer of power, is also a signifier of the anxiety of power relations. Because the behavior, rivalries, and relationships knights shared in general defined "war and peace, fellowship and civil strife" (78), examining the masculinities of Camelot helps to understand the Arthurian framework. The volume moves on to the Renaissance with Bracher's article, which offers a unique interpretative context to Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599). By involving the concept of gender scripts—which, according to psychologists, helps the construction of identity—Bracher argues that this particular play offers not only a "rich array of masculinity scripts" (97), but also criticizes the relevance of the dominant masculinity of Renaissance representations.

Emig's essay reveals another construction: sentimental masculinity in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771). Sentimentality is specifically interesting from the perspective of gender studies as, from the twenty-first century, according to Emig, it is often associated with femininity, whereas Sentimentalism in itself is a universal concept without gender. His essay suggests that some inheritance of the Sentimental hero's characteristics still lives among us, especially when we discuss the concept of the "new man" who is sensitive enough to acknowledge emotions and questions normative gender relations. Horlacher, reading Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), implicitly carries on with this argument, adding that masculine constructions are fragmented. The character of Jude Fawley is "positioned within the different

fields of discourses and sign systems which constitute culture and which, by offering different subject positions, influence and shape gender identity” (147). Jude Fawley’s gender identity is typically a shifting concept as he tries to balance between his wishes and societal expectations. The four articles making up the second part of *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice* offer thorough and detailed analyses on constructions of masculinity and tend to focus on the examination of character development. They also emphasize the supposed stability of gender relations in bygone historical/literary periods.

In the interpretative context of masculinity studies, theoreticians and critics also explore the disordered way in which contemporary men cannot find the proper terminology to express themselves as men. Due to the troubled heritage of the twentieth century, men may feel pressure to change and re-invent their own sense of masculinity beyond the strict heteronormative standards in which they were positioned. The various essays in the last segment capture this changeable spirit well. Regarding the placement of the analyses, the editor chose to follow the chronological order of the given literary texts. This may seem a wise decision for the one-time reader; however, it is not necessarily positive regarding the structure. Upon reaching the third segment, the coherence between the essays becomes loose due to the lack of connecting elements besides the theme of masculinity.

Despite these minimal interconnections, the last five articles capture the essence of the ongoing developmental process in literature in texts by John Osborne, John Braine, Ian McEwan, Hanif Kureishi, Caryl Phillips, and Will Self. Within the chosen literary works, all authors of the remaining five articles—Sebastian Müller, Fatemeh Hosseini, Bettina Schötz, Bénédicte Ledent, and Daniel Lukes—propose and deconstruct different masculinities within the cultural approaches of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature.

Müller’s article compares the key characters of two crucial writers: Jimmy Porter in Osborne’s play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), and Joe Lampton in Braine’s novel, *Room at the Top* (1957). Müller argues that the clash between the classes epitomizes the working-class hero whose appearance on the social palette is a threat to the social order. Jimmy Porter and Joe Lampton represent a masculine construction whose complexity derives from the strife to be recognized by the middle-class which they hate and admire at the same time. Hosseini interprets the first four novels of McEwan by introducing the term of “filiarchy,” the “reign of sons, thus suggesting the end of patriarchy” (193); these masculinities represent a more balanced connection with

femininity, positioning them into a “post patriarchal” setting. Schötz analyzes several of Kureishi’s short stories in which she investigates male identities in their everyday circumstances addressing themes such as mid-life crisis, depression, and fatherhood.

Ledent explores masculinity constructions in Phillips’s novels, carefully depicting the “invisible men” he employs in his fiction. In Ledent’s essay, the male characters of Phillips often seem to be “less memorable” (252) as the feminine characters’ strong presence “[steals] the show from them” (252). Therefore, the invisibility of these men becomes characteristic of Phillips’s fiction, emphasizing the complexity of their gender representation in the narrative. Analyzing Self’s *The Book of Dave* (2006), Lukes successfully argues about the critical approach of fatherhood, while he also raises the problem of men who openly articulate their desire to have children, as “contemporary fatherhood narratives are thus often narratives about the lack of adequate contemporary fatherhood narratives” (276). Within this framework, fatherhood seems to become an embarrassment rather than a desire.

Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice is a volume that does not aspire to become British literary history, nor an indispensable essay collection. What it proposes to do—and, indeed, does accomplish—is to give readers a general overview: it shows how the field of men’s studies has developed since its appearance in the 1980s, and provides revelatory readings of masculine constructions in canonized and contemporary texts of British literature. This set of essays is ideal for readers who wish to gain new interpretative methodologies to reading literary texts.

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