Antony Rowland, Emma Liggins and Eriks Uskalis, eds.

*Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present.*


**Reviewed by Calvin Thomas**

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From a feminist perspective, the project of masculinity studies can be quite suspect, particularly when the studies are conducted by men themselves. Although most feminists recognize that masculinity, like femininity for women, is not a natural or essential identity for men but rather a social construction open to interrogation and change, some feminists see gender/masculinity studies as a sort of hostile institutional takeover that effectively shifts critical attention away from the conditions of women under patriarchal domination and returns it to the "plight" of men. On this view, masculinity studies may be valued for focusing on men as men rather than as abstract representatives of a universalized human condition, but such studies are to be questioned to the extent that they reaffirm masculinity by once again insisting on its centrality. Moreover, whether the discourse be the older masculinist humanism or the newer masculinity studies, the net effect threatens to remain the same: the marginalization of women's experiences and the dilution or refutation of specifically feminist arguments about male dominance. For far too long, one might say, masculinity went unstudied. Now, as the proliferation of works on masculinity in the 1990's attests, it is being studied. The point for feminism, however, would be to change it.

The volume under consideration here, *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present*, edited by Antony Rowlands, Emma Liggins, and Eriks Uskalis, is in many ways a valuable contribution to the fields of masculinity studies and British literary criticism, though it may do little to allay the feminist suspicions described above. Some of the problems--with the volume and with masculinity studies in general--are apparent in the very language used by the editors, at the outset of their collectively written introduction, to justify the study of masculinity itself. For example, the editors suggest that for too long gender studies has been "fixated on femininity" (3). And because feminist theory has "threatened to monopolise gender criticism and gender studies," it is "essential to redress this balance by asking what the 'empty' category of masculinity can reveal about gender relations, sexuality and men's social roles, and how it can offer alternative ways of reading and evaluating literary texts" (4).

Although the questions posed here and throughout the volume about the category of masculinity are crucial, one wonders why they need to be posed in response to a feminism represented as fixated, threatening, and monopolizing. One might also ask just what balance (or rather, one should say, imbalance) such questions should essentially redress. While the editors are correct, in my view, to contest a fixed, monolithic view of normative masculinity, and to reveal it as riven with ambiguities and anxieties,
they themselves at times seem overly anxious to blame feminism for the fix. Normative masculinity, they write, "is often essentialised by feminist critics whose arguments rely on universalised notions of gender identity. However, critics from cultural history, literature and cultural studies have contested this version of events, often using ideas drawn from poststructuralism and postmodernism, to authorise their claims for a more pluralised, fluid conception of male identity" (7). Tellingly, this formulation is only partially right: as I have argued elsewhere[1], feminism does risk essentializing and naturalizing masculinity by leaving it unstudied, but feminism is of course what gives us the critical means to discuss essentialism and naturalization in regard to gender in the first place. And while poststructuralism elaborates more pluralized, fluid conceptions of identity than normative gender categories can countenance, the modification of the word "identity" with the adjective "male" works against the very plurality and fluidity that poststructuralism wants to put in play. A phrase such as "the ambiguities of male identity" is contradictory in that the function of the designation "male" itself is usually to monopolize and solidify identity by resolving the very ambiguities in question. And when the editors write that "in trying to make sense of the absences and uncertainties involved in the representations of men, students of masculinity need to ask how to fill in the gaps, and to move towards new vocabularies and stories" (4), the reference to gap-filling inadvertently suggests that the move to a new, less phallic vocabulary isn't being made here. Arguably, what the critical student of masculinity needs is not a knowledge that will fill gaps, resolve ambiguities, and assuage anxieties but a vocabulary that will leave all of these productively open.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the editors' stance is that their contestation of "normative masculinity" is cast in terms of battling "stereotypes" about men and male dominance perpetuated by feminism. The following is indicative:

Difficulties in theorizing masculinity relate to the restrictive and stereotypical ways in which men have been culturally constructed in both literature and society. Patriarchy proves an almost insurmountable stumbling-block for critics aiming to provide an affirmative reading of masculinity, as men have been historically categorized as oppressors, exercising their power over women at every opportunity and at every level of society. . . . Whilst it would be naïve to ignore the issues around patriarchy which underpin Anglo-American feminist theory, [it is] productive to ask different questions about the constructions of masculinity . . . . Closer examinations of the literary representation of men may reveal not their unequivocal status and power over women . . . but the uncertainties and instabilities of their position within the text, and a mediation of the anxieties and ambiguities attendant on cultural constructions of masculinity. Totalised male dominance remains within the realm of fantasy, or it may be challenged and questioned by literature, set up as a misleading cultural myth. (5-6)

The passage seems perilously close to suggesting that, because masculinity is "merely" a cultural construction comprised of restrictive stereotypes, the notion of men as oppressors is "only" a historical categorization, male dominance "only" a misleading cultural myth. In other words, though it would be naïve to ignore feminist theory, feminists have in fact been misleading us men with their myths about male

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dominance. Moreover, the passage leaves open the question of why particular critics aim "to provide an affirmative reading of masculinity" and what, exactly, is to be affirmed in such reading.

Fortunately, the rest of the introduction (written, after all, by three different people) is less affirmative, less defensive against feminism, and hence more critical of masculinity, than the portions I have focused upon thus far, though there is a general tendency throughout the volume to affirm or protect masculinity when it can be associated with working-class men's experience and against capitalist exploitation and bourgeois policing. The introduction does raise important (if by now familiar) questions involving male bodies and sexuality, constitutive fears of effeminacy and homosexuality, male violence (read, again, as a symptom of class tension), and matters of race.

As for the essays themselves, there are ten, grouped in two historical categories: "Men in Literature 1700-1900," and "Men in Literature 1900 to the present." The first group includes Stephen Gregg's treatment of abjection, cannibalism, and sodomy in Robinson Crusoe; Emma Liggins' investigation of the erosics of the spectacle of the hanged (that's hanged) male criminal body in Newgate novels; Daniel Duffy on Anne Brontë's negotiations of the Victorian masculine ideal; Liz Hedgecock on Gissing; and Scott McCracken on Edward Carpenter. The second group begins with Matthew Pateman on the ejaculating male body in pornography and includes William Stephenson on authorial anxiety in Golding; Antony Rowland on class and masculinity in the poetry of Tony Harrison; John McLeod on Ian McEwan; and Eriks Uskalis on Graham Swift and Peter Carey. All of the essays are well-researched and professionally (if sometimes stolidly) written; none are overly clogged with what some people like to call jargon. The strongest essays, from my perspective, are those like Gregg's and Pateman's that make productive use of Kristeva's notion of abjection (though Pateman's treatment of ejaculation in pornography would have benefitted from an acquaintance with the work of Linda Williams). I also liked Stephenson's work because it considers the question of "men in literature" not simply in terms of representations of men as characters but in terms of the way writing itself, the very structure of representation, puts masculine authority at risk. Some interpretations, on the other hand, are rather strained, as when Hedgecock suggests that Gissing is attempting to "feminize" Hardy by referring to him as "old." Some attempts to theorize masculinity in terms of class are more interesting for (and interested in) what they have to say about class than about masculinity.

On the whole, however, Signs of Masculinity is a valuable contribution to a growing field, mainly because it continues a productive conversation about the value of the field to which it contributes. Although I have reservations about certain moves the editors make in their introduction (more than I've mentioned here), the essays collected in this volume are needed, even if, from a feminist perspective, still perhaps inevitably suspect.

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