



THE VICTORIAN NOVEL AND MASCULINITY

Edited by
Phillip Mallett



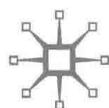
The Victorian Novel and Masculinity

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Phillip Mallett

University of St Andrews, UK

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The Victorian Novel and Masculinity

Also by Phillip Mallett

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PALGRAVE ADVANCES IN THOMAS HARDY STUDIES (*ed.*)

RUDYARD KIPLING: A LITERARY LIFE

Thomas Hardy, THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE (*ed.*)

Preface

On ne naît pas homme: on le devient: one is not born a man, one becomes one. Often taking their lead from feminist writers, as here from Simone de Beauvoir, recent critics, historians and social commentators have paid increasing attention to what now seems a self-evident truth: men too have a gender. Male identity is not an ahistorical given, but the outcome of shifting cultural contest and debate, inflected by class, race, religion, and sexual orientation. It is necessarily conceived and experienced within a particular discursive figuration, and since discursive boundaries vary with historical conditions, it is never fully achieved, grasped once and for all. Masculinity is ineluctably a relational construct, shaped by and within the totality of gender relations, and as these change so too does the notion of what constitutes the manly; rather than a single idea of masculinity, the historian has to consider a matrix of culturally and historically specific *masculinities*.

The field of 'men's studies' may be seen as a back-formation of women's studies, as these were established in the colleges and academies alongside the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. Men's studies have both built on and resisted the radical feminist argument of that period, accepting the importance of gender in structuring social relations and identity, but also challenging the polemical strategies which assumed a monolithic model of patriarchy, and the consequent expectation that feminist thought and masculinity must be locked in undying antagonism. Instead, insights drawn from feminism have been called upon to interrogate different masculinities.¹ On the one hand, queer theory in particular has encouraged the description and analysis of difference within as well as between genders and sexualities; on the other, the changing social patterns of the 1990s and beyond have led an increasing number of men to reject traditional definitions of hegemonic masculinity, in terms of toughness, competitiveness, and the search for public or material success. If these terms are derived from a set of socially approved scripts and ideals, so familiar as to seem imperatives derived from nature rather than shaped by culture and discourse, that has been all the more reason to question them.

In a different idiom, this questioning is evident across the range of Victorian writing. In his 1831 essay 'Characteristics', Thomas Carlyle claimed that 'The old ideal of Manhood has grown obsolete, and the new is still invisible to us, and we grope after it in darkness, one clutching this phantom, another that.' Historians and literary scholars have explored the various attempts, some conscious, some implicit, to develop a new ideal, as older versions of manhood and manliness, bound up with aristocratic notions of rank and honour, began to lose their hold; symptomatically, the last fatal duel fought between Englishmen on English soil took place in 1845. Increasingly, masculinity was understood subjectively, or as James Eli Adams puts it as 'a mode of being', rather than expressed through a set of actions coded as 'manly'.² Central to this new subjectivity, as Herbert Sussman and others have argued, was the emphasis on self-discipline, and in particular the learned ability to control potentially disruptive male energies.³ Victorian representations of manliness abound in metaphors of iron restraint, patience and reserve, opposed to images of volcanic chaos or excess. The more intense the conflict, the more manly the victory: indeed, the struggle for self-mastery could itself be construed as a sign of masculinity, since women, with their supposedly gentler natures, were thought to be exempt from such trials. On this account, Victorian manhood was by definition a state of permanent crisis, a site of anxiety and contradiction as much as a source of power.

Training in self-discipline began in the nursery, under the guidance of the mother, but with the rise in the number and quality of the public schools – by the 1860s some 30 new or reformed institutions had been added to the original nine – it was, for the boys of the middle class, generally completed in an all-male world remote from feminine influence. This was in part the point: as John Tosh remarks, in contrast to the atmosphere of home and family, which was increasingly seen as 'feminised' in an age which set a high value on companionate marriage and shared domesticity – albeit tempered by occasional flight to the study, the smoking room and the men's club – the public schools 'offered a crash course in manliness'.⁴ The key word in the public school vocabulary was 'character', used in its evaluative sense to denote self-restraint, industry and perseverance in the face of difficulty, and when so used a virtual synonym for manliness. But as Stefan Collini points out, the mid-Victorian idea

of character depended on a prior notion of duty: character exhibited itself in a willing submission of one's own interests to a larger goal or cause.⁵ The crucial lesson learned by Tom Brown in Thomas Hughes's novel is the need to accept his responsibility towards the school as a community, summed up on his last evening at Rugby by his recognition that organized team games like cricket represent a higher moral good than those where 'the object is to come in first or to win for oneself and not that one's side may win'. The distinction, made explicit in the novel, is parallel to that between 'working to get your living', and 'doing some real good in the world'. Built into the mid-Victorian idea of the manly character was the classical notion of virtue, mediated by the civic humanist discourses of the Renaissance and the still powerful influence of Evangelicalism. The true index of a man's worth, as promoted in the public schools, was his willingness and capacity for public service.⁶

Beyond the school system, the *locus classicus* for such ideas was the final chapter of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), entitled 'Character – the True Gentleman'. According to Smiles, it was open to anyone, even those of 'comparatively little culture' and 'but small wealth', to acquire those qualities of 'Self-respect, self-help, application, industry, integrity' which constitute 'Character' and are 'the true heraldry of man'. To do so is to become not simply a man, but a gentleman. There is some slippage in Smiles's account, between the claim that character represents 'moral order embodied in the individual' and is thus a good in itself, and the illustrative stories that follow, where character has instrumental value as a means to command 'power' or the 'road to prosperity and wealth', but in the main the emphasis falls on character as both the motive for and reward of exertion. Smiles aimed to reach out to aspiring or upper-working-class men – those prudent enough to delay marriage, or to spend their evenings in the Working Men's Clubs or Mechanics' Institutes rather than the taverns – but the issues here are complex. Despite Smiles's use of 'True' as a qualifier, the Victorian idea of the gentleman, as Robin Gilmour has shown, was never simply moral;⁷ it always included a social or class aspect. To the simple 'manly' qualities of self-respect, energy and integrity, the gentleman added not just graceful manners and accomplishments but what John Ruskin desiderated as 'sensitiveness', that 'fineness of structure' in both mind and body which rendered the gentleman, unlike those not born into the caste,

capable of 'the most delicate sympathies'.⁸ This sensitiveness, however, could be construed as unmanly, in its apparent deference to the judgement of other people. This is the view of John Thornton, Mrs Gaskell's spokesman for Manchester industrialism in *North and South*: 'I take it that "gentleman" is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as "a man", we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself, – to life – to time – to eternity.'⁹ Gaskell, like Dickens and Hardy later, is acutely aware of the way notions of masculine identity are informed by class, and of the consequent difficulties in the negotiation of social and gender boundaries.

Carlyle's account of the need for a new 'ideal of Manhood' is embedded in a wider narrative of struggle and anxiety in an age self-conscious about change. That emphasis coheres with Herbert Sussman's argument that for the Victorians manhood was 'not an essence but a plot, a condition whose achievement and maintenance forms a narrative over time'.¹⁰ The separate stages of that narrative are broadly familiar. Following the transition from nursery to school, and thence into the world of work, to become a man it was necessary to establish and provide for a home, to maintain control over it, and to beget and train a son and heir. Even this relatively simple path was not uncontested. Tractarian writers like R. W. Church made the case for celibacy as the mark of true strength and manhood, as against 'an unmanly preference for English home life', only to be answered with customary robustness by Charles Kingsley, for whom the phrase heterosexual normativity might have been invented: 'Fully to understand the meaning of "a Father in Heaven", we must be fathers ourselves; to know how Christ loved the Church, we must have wives and love them.'¹¹

The corresponding 'plot' in fiction was the Bildungsroman, usually entangled with a courtship plot, and often seen as a masculine form, if only contingently, in that it typically traces male social mobility and self-formation. The paradigmatic example might be Dinah Mulock's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856). The hero, an orphan, begins work at the age of fourteen in a tannery; proves himself an indispensable employee; woos and marries an heiress; becomes master in his own business; suffers various trials as a father, including the death of one daughter, a son who goes to the bad, and another daughter who falls in love with a worthless nobleman; is later reconciled with them

all, and dies peacefully at home. One step away from this is Dickens's story of another orphan, Philip Pirrip, who loses faith in the blacksmith's forge as 'the glowing road to manhood and independence',¹² tries to become a gentleman with the help of a convict's money, woos but does not win the heiress, and in the original ending settles for life abroad as a bachelor, with a nephew but no son. The masculinity which in *John Halifax, Gentleman* is a normative referent becomes, in *Great Expectations*, a problematic and unstable construct.

It was to become more so. However it was defined, masculinity in the later nineteenth century seemed to many writers to be facing threats from every angle. Growing numbers of women entered the white-collar labour market and the professions, literally jostling male workers on the trains and omnibuses. Slow but incremental legal changes diminished the rights and control men had previously held over their wives' property, their persons and their children. More radically, the campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts marked what Judith Walkowitz has described as the beginning of a 'real sex war', soon intensified by the battle to raise the age of consent.¹³ The 1880s saw the arrival of the New Woman, the subject of numerous novels, plays, cartoons and opinion pieces in the last two decades of the century. Notorious, at any rate in the periodical press, for her bicycling, her smoking, and her transgressive views, the New Woman took to fiction to demand the arrival of an equivalent 'New Man'. Gender boundaries seemed about to blur: it was well enough for Mrs Gaskell or Dickens to valorise the nurturing male, another matter altogether for Olive Schreiner, in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), to portray Gregory Rose as a man who finds fulfilment dressed as a woman, nursing an unmarried heroine as she dies in childbirth. The distinction between the sexed body and the cultural meanings attached to gender, which has been crucial to much recent discussion, is seemingly taken for granted by Schreiner: Gregory Rose would have lived a more integrated life as Rose Gregory.

Meanwhile, the declining birth rate, the increasing power of rival nations, and fears of 'degeneration' among working-class males and of the depletion of nervous strength among men of the professional classes, fostered an ever more anxious effort to police the borders of what constituted 'normal' masculine character and behaviour. Angus McLaren has traced how the discourses of law, medicine and politics helped construct and maintain dominant forms of masculinity by

defining and stigmatizing negative or deviant versions of male identity,¹⁴ notably in the Labouchère Amendment to the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, by which acts of 'gross indecency' between men were classed as 'misdemeanours', punishable by up to two years' hard labour. Almost as telling, however, was a shift in the meaning given to the word 'pervert' in the later nineteenth century, from a religious to a sexual context. In an age of uncertainty, the readiest way to define heterosexual normativity was to set up new categories of defective masculinity, such as homosexuals, transvestites, exhibitionists and sadists.

The changing climate was inevitably reflected in the fiction of the 1880s and 1890s, as mid-Victorian themes and forms were taken up only to be given heightened, distorted or parodic treatment: the struggle to control unruly male energies rendered spectacularly unsuccessful in the double lives in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); the ideal of homosocial bonding in the literal mingling of male bloods by the 'Crew of Light' in *Dracula* (1897); the adventure story in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the hero to be rescued is deranged; even the school story, with its optimistic teleology, in Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* (1899), in which the 'stalky' trio despise team games, care nothing for the honour of the 'House', and show no desire to become prefects and Christian gentlemen, preferring to remain, as Robert Buchanan protested, 'not like boys at all, but like hideous little men'.¹⁵ In Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, the unhappy Richard Phillotson tortures himself with concepts of 'masculinity and chivalry' which oblige him to save Sue not from an external danger, but from himself, as the husband who makes her wretched.¹⁶ Jude, meanwhile, becomes the hero of a Bildungsroman *manqué*. He acquires learning, but to no avail; he marries twice, but dies alone, and childless; and he ends still obscure, unable to prove his manhood either by remaining within and serving his class, or rising out of it. Like more recent theorists of masculinity, Jude finds that to live in a man's world is not the same as to live in one which answers men's needs.

Hardy, temperamentally drawn to the 'provisional', was finely attuned to issues of gender instability, as Jane Thomas shows in her essay in this volume. The novel mattered in Victorian England in part because it offered a way of exploring, questioning and reinforcing

values and beliefs, including beliefs about gender, role and identity. The chapters that follow, covering a broad range of Victorian fiction, from the industrial novel at the outset of the period through to the imperial novel at its close, examine an equally broad repertoire of gendered styles adopted, or resisted – including, say, Joe Gargery, Dickens's portrait of a 'gentle Christian man' (yet not quite a Christian gentleman), Pater's studious, inquiring Marius, and Rider Haggard's latter-day Viking Sir Henry Curtis, wielding his battle-axe deep in the lost world of the Kukuanas. Had a new Carlyle emerged in the 1890s, to write again on the 'Characteristics' of the age, he – or, by this date just as likely, she – would have had to acknowledge that there was and could be no monolithic 'ideal of Manhood', neither as a goal to be embraced, nor as a standard no individual man can live up to or fulfil, but rather a diversity of masculinities.

The essays that follow have been written specifically for this volume. I am grateful to the contributors, and to Ben Doyle and Sophie Ainscough at Palgrave Macmillan, for their patience while it was in progress, and to Mollie Craven-Mallett for hers.

Notes

1. See, for example, the essays collected in *Masculinist Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
2. James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 34.
3. Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 13.
4. John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 118.
5. Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 100.
6. See Peter J. Cain, 'Empire and the Languages of Virtue and Character in Later Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Modern Intellectual History* 4.2 (2007), pp. 249–73. On the shift in nature of the public school in the later nineteenth century, from the quasi-monastic, with an emphasis on service, to the quasi-military, and a training in leadership, see among others J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).
7. Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 1–9.
8. John Ruskin, 'Of Vulgarity', in *Modern Painters V* (1860): *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–12), Vol. VII, pp. 343–62.

9. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855). The conversation is in Chapter 20, entitled 'Men and Gentlemen'.
10. Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, p. 13.
11. R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years, 1833–1845* (London: Macmillan, 1891), p. 321; *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*, ed. Fanny Kingsley, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1879), Vol. I, p. 222.
12. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860), quoting from Chapter 14.
13. Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 147.
14. Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago University Press, 1997).
15. Robert Buchanan, 'The Voice of the Hooligan', *Contemporary Review* December 1899, LXXVI, pp. 776–89.
16. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1896), Part Fourth, Chapter IV. Phillotson goes on to wonder whether 'the woman and the children should be the unit without the man', which was Hardy's own position; see Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, eds, *Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88), Vol. III, p. 238.

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1

Masculinity, Power and Play in the Work of the Brontës

Sara Lodge

'I am a sailor. Captain Arthur Fitz-Arthur, commander of the *Formidable*, one hundred guns. Your Lordship is Miss Jessy Heathcote.'

Many who study the Brontës still do not read the Angrian fiction, despite the fact that it forms a body of work larger than all their published novels combined and that reading only those published novels means joining their fictive practice quite late: Charlotte was 30 by the time she ventured into print. There are various reasons for this relative neglect. Until recently, it was difficult to access the early work of Charlotte and Branwell in a format that lent itself to sustained reading.¹ The tiny 'books' in which they wrote were, indeed, deliberately designed to make this writing 'secret': its manuscript format and insider narratives, while they minutely mimic the appearance of published texts, are purposely designed for a private rather than a public audience. The early work is discontinuous and potentially confusing: it consists of dialogues, reviews, plays, histories, poetry and stories. The Angrian narratives form episodes – like those of a soap opera – in an on-going drama with a large, inter-related cast of characters, many of whom go by several different names. As Sally Shuttleworth remarks, Charlotte's Angrian tales have often also been politely overlooked due to the 'common misapprehension that all her early writing takes place amidst exotic climes in a heady atmosphere of emotional intensity'.² Far from being juvenile gush and mush, however, Charlotte's early fiction is rumbustious, political, highly rhetorical, and increasingly sophisticated: it experiments