
Stefan Horlacher (ed.). *Constructions of Masculinity in British Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 278 pp., € 65.99.

In his contribution to this very enjoyable and wide-ranging collection, Michael Kimmel points out that the Chinese character which corresponds to the term ‘crisis’ combines the symbol for ‘danger’ with that for ‘opportunity’ (cf. 106). Etymologically, the word ‘crisis’ originates from medical discourse, where it denotes the turning point (for better or worse) in the course of a disease. So when Stefan Horlacher opens the introduction to this volume with the question if and how far the conception of masculinity is undergoing such a period of crisis at present, he strikes a note which has dominated not only theoretical discourses of gender in the 21st century but which has also become a staple feature of social and political lore. Among the reasons most frequently cited for this crisis are the strenuous position of the contemporary male between the Scylla of professional success and ruthless career management and the Charybdis of family obligations and a well-adjusted ‘work-life-balance’, the lack of male role models and/or educators or the legal discrimination of fathers. All this supposedly leads to a profound feeling of disorientation, which manifests itself variously in a decline in male competitiveness or an increase in hate crimes perpetrated by bewildered and confused young males desperate to make a mark in a society that has robbed them of their place and significance. In late 2012, Hanna Rosin even predicted *The End of Men*, and, so we hear, girls are now for the first time ever the preferred sex for parents seeking help in fertility clinics.

Even when we subtract the hullabaloo that necessarily adheres to any such supposedly new development of how Western society conceives of itself, there

remain two aspects which have to be acknowledged. The era of the masculine as the untouched and culturally unreflected gender has come to an end, which undoubtedly marks a significant step in the collective gender imaginary and could even be seen as the fulfilment of one particular strain of feminist thinking which can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir. This proper inclusion of the masculine into the discourse of gender roles and constructions has resulted in a moment of insecurity, as the master narratives of masculinity are challenged and deconstructed. To the same degree to which the position of masculinity is being questioned, theoretical investigations of what it actually means to be a man have proliferated. Men's Studies or Masculinity Studies, and this is the second aspect, by now arguably constitute one of the most vivid and interesting areas in the field of Gender Studies, and in his introduction the editor provides evidence for the dynamics and diversity which characterize this area today.

From a cynical point of view, one could argue that the intense theoretical occupation with questions of masculinity is itself only the latest in a long series of male attempts to conquer and cultivate new ground, to find cultural and political excuses for gazing at one's own navel or such like. For as much as the rise and advance of Masculinity Studies might seem to parallel that of feminist theory in the second half of the 20th century, there is one flagrant discrepancy. While feminist thinking essentially focused on relations of otherness *between* the two genders (and how to overcome them), studies of masculinity tend to locate the disruption squarely *within* the male sex, which is often presented as in danger of becoming other to itself.

It is at this crucial point in the (self-)understanding of masculinity that Horlacher's collection both adds fuel to the flames of male bewilderment *and* offers comfort in the shape of historical precedent. The first part is dedicated to taking stock of the current theoretical state of affairs. After that, the book embarks on a wild tour through British literature to investigate various configurations of masculinity, taking in late medieval knights and Victorian adventures, 18th-century gentlemen and the New Lads of today. It goes without saying that such an inclusive approach can never lay claim to any completeness and can only ever present a cursory overview. Still, it might have helped the overall consistency of the book had the editor introduced the individual contributions in more detail. Having said that, the spotlights chosen add up to a surprisingly comprehensive picture and make a strong case for the assumption that we are far from being the first generation to put masculinity to the test. Furthermore, they neatly illustrate Harry Brod's claim that "there is no such thing as masculinity" (26), that any theoretical account of this notion is only ever an approximation, generalization and – more often than not – distortion of what in reality are infinitely variable and differentiated individual narratives.

Together with the editor's introduction, the articles by Brod and Kevin Floyd form the theoretical framework for the subsequent readings. Brod offers a comprehensive overview of the history of the discipline, placing special emphasis on the question how power relations (between men and women, but also – crucially – between men) have always structured the way masculinities have been theorized. The most influential of these theories is R. W. Connell's analysis of 'hegemonic masculinity', which has by now acquired an almost hegemonic and Butleresque status of the 'conceptio-sine-qua-non' in the area of Masculinity Studies.

While Brod reflects on developments that have brought Masculinity Studies to where they are today, Floyd chances an audacious look ahead. Taking the category of 'intersex' as his point of departure, he claims that, as the possibilities of surgical reconstruction advance, it will be necessary to imagine "an outside to the very distinction between masculinity and femininity" and to develop the conceptual tools to deal with this outside (46). Using Foucault's notion of 'biopolitics' to support his argument, Floyd highlights the significance of the individual body for any re-conception of gender identities. If masculinity can at one point be realised without and outside the confines of the male body, this will produce "new practices and experiences of embodied gender" (46) which constitute a site of gender trouble with regard to normative patterns of bio-power. Although I see the rationale that led Horlacher to group the three theoretical articles together, I would have preferred Floyd's contribution to conclude the book as it is the only one that emphatically looks ahead and emphasizes the opportunities inherent in the alleged crisis of contemporary masculinity rather than contextualise its dangers and discontents.

The literary analyses which follow are sensibly arranged in chronological order. They cover a period of nearly 700 years and embrace large parts of the globe, from Africa to the postcolonial metropolis. They present a wide range of social strata, from the facetious genteelness of the Restoration fop to the loutish behaviour of the New Lad. In terms of constructions of masculinity, the articles fall into two primary categories. While some (prominently Kimmel, Mergenthal and Ochsner) investigate periods where socio-political circumstances provoke and necessitate a re-adjustment of the parameters by which 'proper' masculine conduct is adjudicated, others (Johnston, Karremann and Schneider) examine and call the bluff of apparently stable configurations of masculinity.

Kicking off the quest for literary masculinities is Andrew James Johnston, whose reading of the 14th-century romance *Gamelyn* highlights how the, in this case profoundly physical, struggle for or against one's own masculinity is always inextricably framed by the socio-political discourse of its time. For the duration of a semi-nude wrestling bout, the tale's eponymous hero manages to

literally disinvest himself of the expectations that come with his role as a knight errant. Johnston convincingly shows how the reduction of both competitors to the sheer level of physical presence creates “a utopian space of a supposedly classless masculinity” (51), which collapses as soon as Gamelyn returns to his feudalistic frame of reference. Gabriele Rippl’s contribution, which carries us swiftly forward to the 17th century, is noteworthy primarily because it makes obvious the often underestimated fact that masculinity is never, and never has been, men’s business alone. Rippl examines three autobiographical texts by women with a view to how the authors use writing to construct consistent masculine identities for their fathers or husbands, arguing that the reiteration of the men’s faultless adherence to these ideals itself amounts to a “clear indication that their notion of manhood was already in crisis” (84).

In the next article, Michael Kimmel elaborates on this crisis. Through an analysis of various pamphlets circulating in the second half of the 17th century, he demonstrates how the massive political upheavals of that period paved the way for a renegotiation of gender relations in general and conceptions of masculinity in particular. Key battlegrounds were the role of marriage, the liberation of female sexuality and the status of the family. The direction, if not the tone, of the argument makes for an astonishingly topical reading, as calls for more equality between the sexes are accompanied by fears that men might become more effeminate or even, horror of horrors, homosexual as a consequence. The two essays that follow both investigate canonical texts that mark the rise of the novel in the 18th century. Isabel Karremann persuasively reads *Gulliver’s Travels* as a satire against the stoic and detached ideal of the Augustan gentleman, as Gulliver is repeatedly forced to physically renegotiate “the fluctuating boundaries between male self and female other, savage and civilised being, the human and the nonhuman” (113). Laurenz Volkmann’s analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* is valuable mainly for depicting how changing constructions of masculinity have influenced the reception and critical evaluation of the novel’s protagonist.

Next, Ralf Schneider examines an impressive range of popular Victorian novels to substantiate his claim that the “literary construction of hegemonic masculinity in Victorian fiction functioned through the nonrepresentation of the essential features and the representation of nonessential ones” (150). In an excellent account of the role of ‘Othering’ in the narrative construction of masculinity, Schneider shows how rather than confronting readers with idealizations to be (unsuccessfully) emulated, these novels present deviations to be avoided. Susanne Scholz and Nicola Dropmann focus on one specific genre of popular Victorian fiction and investigate how the struggle for idealized masculinity is relocated to the dark heart of Africa in adventure novels by Henry Rider Haggard. Faced with a dangerous, overwhelming and decidedly female environ-

ment or even an undying mystical warrior queen, the white male explorers can only uphold an image, however distorted, of masculine colonial superiority with the help of technological prostheses such as guns or monocles.

After these challenges to the supposedly fixed spheres of Victorian gender relations, Silvia Mergenthal revisits an event which deeply shook the foundations of the masculine self-image. Through an analysis of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, she shows how the trench warfare of World War I resulted in irreparable damages to earlier ideals of masculine deportment. The experience of shell shock, for example, forced men to be objects of medical and psychological scrutiny hitherto reserved for the fair and hysterical sex. In the only essay that deals primarily with non-heterosexual forms of masculinity, Berthold Schoene uses novels by E. M. Forster, Tom Wakefield and Alan Hollinghurst to reflect on the question in how far access to supposedly normative social rituals such as marriage constitute a triumph or a disaster for queer self-determination. Meinhard Winkgens's contribution transfers established interpretations of Hanif Kureishi's novels *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* as examples of cultural hybridity to a specifically gendered context, resulting in 'fluid masculinities' which are not bound to traditional notions of sexual orientation.

The volume closes with Andrea Ochsner's perceptive examination of New Laddism in novels by Nick Hornby, John O'Farrell and Tim Lott. The dichotomy between the New Lad, a "rather lamentable version of manhood" reliant on "solipsistic signifying systems that help ... to reduce complexity" (250-251), and the New Man, who tries to do justice to the complexity of his surroundings by understanding his wife's menstrual cycle as well as the intricacies of the equity market, can serve to illustrate the conflict between masculine role models on offer today. Ochsner thus exemplifies the disorientation about what it means "to be a man in a profeminist, postmodern society in which gender identity cannot be taken for granted anymore but has to be constructed and performed on a daily basis" (252). The essays assembled in this collection persuasively suggest that such disorientation has been at the heart of masculinity and its narrative constructions throughout the ages. They offer refreshing and, more often than not, original perspectives on a broad range of struggles for masculine identity.

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