Introduction: Victorian Masculinities

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(Guest Editors)

The study of Victorian masculinities is now a burgeoning field. In 1995 an emphasis on pluralities was registered in titles such as Herbert Sussman's *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* and Joseph A. Kestner's *Masculinities in Victorian Painting*. Ten years on, Martin A. Danahay's *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* would still be concerned with the many and competing ways in which masculinity was represented in the nineteenth century. This is not the only task of writers on masculinity, however. In 1995 R.W. Connell noted: 'To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them. Further, we have to unpack the milieux of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them.'¹ Much recent work on masculinity does just that and the essays published here reflect this imperative.

On organising a two-day postgraduate conference on Victorian Masculinities we realised, after receiving many proposals, that the subject was a popular one.² What struck us at the conference was the variety of topics and methodologies that were being pursued within studies of masculinity. The following essays, developed from papers given at that conference, deal with masculinity as represented in various forms of art and literature of the period. In this short introduction we wish to outline some of the relevant theoretical developments in the field and to give a brief overview of the essays included.³

One of the necessary challenges when writing about masculinity is deciding what the term actually means. Danahay suggests that:

'Masculinity as a term was not even available for analysis until feminist theory had denaturalized gender categories.'⁴ Such a denaturalization has led to the study of masculinity as inflected by issues such as sexuality, class, race and nationality. Yet at the same time, this diversification carries its own problems. Connell notes that: 'It is easy in this framework to think that there is *a* black masculinity or *a* working-class masculinity.' (76). Articulating what masculinity might mean without essentialising is therefore a challenge. At least two of our authors refer to the type of masculinity they discuss as an 'alternative model'. Such a term might seem to suggest a unified or singular sense of masculinity against which a more marginal type is defined. But whether or not such a type actually existed, attention to the construction of masculinity in various arenas demonstrates that there often was a firm belief in some kind of 'dominant' masculinity.

The notion of 'alternative' masculinities directs us to another development in masculinity studies. Whilst some authors, for example Kestner, have examined dominant models of masculinity ('The Classical Hero', 'The Gallant Knight' and 'The Valiant Soldier'), some, such as Sussman, Thaïs Morgan and Kaja Silverman, have explored more peripheral, or non-normative, male identities.⁵ Thus, Sussman, in *Victorian Masculinities*, aims 'to consider male identity within the individual not as a stable achievement but as an unstable equilibrium, so that the governing terms of Victorian manhood become contradiction, conflict, anxiety'.⁶ In this vein, for example, the exploration of the issue of gender ambiguity, which has generated much stimulating discussion in men's studies, has led to research into the strategy of constructing effeminate or ambiguous personas, which have been employed by some men wishing to distance themselves from conventional ideals of masculinity.

Each of our authors has investigated some of those contradictions, conflicts, and anxieties within their own area of study. The first two essays locate their enquiries into Victorian masculinity outside of Britain, specifically in Africa. Catherine E. Anderson reveals the contrasts and congruences between the 'barbarian' Zulus, and the 'civilized' (white) colonizers through an analysis of pictorial representations and written, non-fiction texts. Anderson's historicising approach demonstrates that the textual and visual descriptions of black Africans were not fixed, but unstable, changing

as the political and economic relationship between the two countries changed. A significant moment for Anderson is the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, a battle fought during the decades (c.1870–1900) when a new, martial, model of masculinity began to be foregrounded.

Madhu Sinha, in her study of H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), analyses the problematization of masculine norms through an encounter with a *femme fatale*, Ayesha. The black Africans in the novel are mentally and physically sluggish and, disturbingly for the white male protagonists, subservient to the power of Ayesha who possesses not only beauty but a formidable intellect (masculine in its mastery of the sciences) and a will to power. Sinha suggests that those who are colonized are also feminized. Moreover, in a final humiliation of woman's aspirations to power, at her death, Ayesha is described by the narrator as resembling a monkey.

Females (of all social classes) appear as consumers of male identity in David Haldane Lawrence's exploration of presentations of the male body on the late-Victorian stage, statically, in *tableaux vivants*, and actively, in theatrical performances. Lawrence argues that the objectification of masculine glamour was largely engendered by the increasing freedoms enjoyed by women, although the beautiful male on the stage was also worshipped by other males. The homoerotic appeal of male performers concerned moral vigilante groups less than the impact of female (partial) nudity on male audiences as, even in the homophobic climate generated by the Wilde trials of 1895, the performers were seen to represent models of masculinity to which men in the audience could aspire.

In Alexandra Tankard's study of consumption in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Story of a Nobody* (1893) our attention shifts from the beautiful and virile body to the sick and emasculated body. Ralph Touchett, in Henry James's novel, and Vladimir Ivanych, the narrator of Anton Chekhov's work, present an alternative model of masculinity. Perceived by other characters as powerless and asexual, they are able to exploit their socially defined emasculation to perform masculine roles other than those of husband, father or economic producer. Yet, Tankard claims, an invariable condition of this 'liberation' is a specific (to invalids) 'imprisonment', as they, the consumptives, then become the victims of female sexual aggression and a humiliating pity.

Although music was central to the artistic project of D.G. Rossetti, Karen Yuen argues that the painter and poet often

denigrated (through strategies of feminization) the art form. As Yuen notes, throughout the nineteenth century music was considered a feminine art form (often associated with frivolity and excessive emotion), and that therefore only certain practices (composing, playing certain instruments, and *public* performance) could be conceived as masculine. Yuen argues that Rossetti's rebelliousness was tempered by an awareness of the need to present himself as a relatively conventional masculine figure in the Victorian social and artistic worlds.

Finally, Heather Ellis argues that Matthew Arnold, in his poetry and his non-fiction, sought to create a non-gendered language of humanity. Although Arnold associated gendered language with narrower views of life, he could never as boldly reject masculine paradigms as John Henry Newman had done. The reasons were partly social (wary of the charge that his notion of culture was 'useless', Arnold frequently stressed its benefits to society) and partly familial, particularly his need to live up to the ideals of his father, an opponent of Newman and one of the century's most powerful advocates of *manly* action in the public sphere. Ellis thus demonstrates how gendered identity is patterned by historical meanings and personal and social expectations.

Each of these papers makes clear the fluidity and instability of masculine identities by revealing their constructions as social processes, the outcomes of self-other interactions informed by historically situated discursive practices. Men's studies has taken from post-feminism the notion of gender as performative. James Eli Adams, for example, claims that what he calls 'Victorian "styles of masculinity"' exemplify Judith Butler's claim that "gender is always a doing".⁷ This influence can be seen in many of our essays where masculinity is always something played out or constructed and never merely 'revealed'. We can see that masculinity can be defined by both its presence – as agents perform normative constructions of masculine subjectivity – and its *apparent* absence – at sites such as the terminally sick body or in (some of) the performances and practices of the art of music. It is hoped that the identification of the plurality of masculinities and spaces at which they are inscribed or repressed will stimulate further interdisciplinary inquiry. If it does, the initial aim of both the 2006 conference and the present volume will have been achieved.

NOTES

1. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, second edition (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 76.
2. Keele University, 20-21 April 2006.
3. For more lengthy overviews of the field see: James Eli Adams, 'The Banality of Transgression?: Recent Works on Masculinity', *Victorian Studies* 36.2 (Winter 1993), 207–10; Anna Davin, 'Historical Masculinities: Regulation, Fantasy and Empire', *Gender and History* 9.1 (April 1997), 135–38; Donald E. Hall, 'The End(s) of Masculinity Studies', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (March 2000), 227–37; Ed Cohen, 'Ma(r)king Men', *Victorian Studies* 36.2 (Winter 1993), 215–21.
4. Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 3.
5. Joseph A. Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995); Thaïs E. Morgan, 'Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater', *Victorian Studies* 36.3 (Spring 1993), 315–32; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
6. Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14–15.
7. James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 2.