

## THE END(S) OF MASCULINITY STUDIES

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*By Donald E. Hall*

IN THE NEAR DECADE SINCE Herbert Sussman published this journal's last review essay on the study of masculinities (in *VLC* 20 from 1992), we in the U.S. have engaged in a heated national debate over "gays in the military," have participated in a wonderfully perverse (to my mind) public discussion on whether or not oral sex is really "sex," have seen a muscle-bound ex-wrestler elected governor of Minnesota and a cross-dressing "bisexual" basketball player make national sports headlines for his skills on the court and in front of the makeup mirror. Issues of masculinity — specifically, issues of self-control, proper and improper forms of male self-expression, and the importance (or lack thereof) of traditional adult male "role models" for youth — have been raised by or figured in all of these controversies. Frankly, I have *loved* the 1990s, have found it a time of enormously entertaining and productive social, cultural, and, yes, scholarly confusion and dynamism. At its best, the decade saw the tackling of some of the most profound issues imaginable regarding the intertwined nature of identity, performance, and politics. At its worst, of course, it simply saw the rehashing of dreary, formulaic answers to some of the toughest questions it dared to pose (a media-encouraged policy of "Oh, ask, *please* ask, . . . but first let's promise not to tell each other anything that we don't particularly want to hear").

And what is true for network discussions of presidential antics with cigars in the Oval Office has been equally true for scholarly interventions on Victorian and twentieth-century masculinities. The language may be more abstruse, the citation of authority more extensive, and the concepts (somewhat) more refined, but the same range from simplistic and mechanical to intellectually supple and energizing is apparent among the books that this review will discuss. Indeed, one is left after reading back-to-back the eight books covered here (actually, re-reading them during a trip to Hawaii, in my case) and after reaching the end of a decade of frenzied talkshow probings of the limits of the personal and the public, of morphic masculinities and playful performances, with something like a sense of exhaustion: certainly not of and with an entire field of inquiry, but more of and with a process and type of questioning that has fairly well charted many of the behaviors that comprise masculinity, even if their future courses, as well as past and present effects upon desire, have yet to be fully addressed or even contemplated. After all, the one CNN poll question that no one dared to ask during the Clinton/Lewinsky spectacle was precisely how many Americans, female and male, heterosexual and homosexual, would have

accommodated a request by Bill Clinton for oral sex, if he had asked them nicely. The answer to that question might have told us a lot more about power, desire, and changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality than anything we can vaguely surmise from Clinton's surprisingly steady "approval" rating.

Yes, "times change," a cliché that bears repeating here, as I am going to examine my eight books on "masculinity" in chronological order, which of course is not the only way one could arrange a review essay of this sort. In *Fixing Patriarchy*, my own modest (and somewhat tangential) intervention in the field covered here, I argue that

a diverse set of novels, poems, and essays, when read chronologically, reveals something of a social "metanarrative" of gender-associated conflict, crisis, and accommodation, but certainly it is a "metanarrative" that is fault-riddled and friction-filled. Neither history nor responsible historiography points toward strictly linear progressions. Even so, how else can we understand discourse and discursive changes if we do not examine how culture evolves over time, or more precisely *in* time, as it draws on the past and anticipates the future? (14)

I stand by those statements vis-à-vis literary critical as well as literary writing, but would add that by focusing directly upon gradual (and a few dramatic) changes over time, we can shift our critical goals appropriately and energize ourselves as we tackle the many concrete problems and larger problematics that will require years of concerted effort to address and understand. To indulge for a moment in another cliché, we might say that exhaustion is inevitable for the flogger of dead horses; after all, how does he or she know when to stop? The simple point of this review is that some of the horses of Victorian studies have gone to meet their maker. And it is important for all of us floggers to bear in mind that lots and lots of other creatures, great and small, await our flogging, though certainly they too will repay our very earnest efforts by dying in their turn.

Given the fact that I am covering almost a decade of work here, we should always bear in mind that some of our poor horses have traveled a very long distance. Martin A. Danahay's *A Community of One: Masculine Autobiography and Autonomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, published in 1993, represents the earliest work covered here; that it may read as somewhat dated now is hardly surprising given the changing nature of the field. Its limitations, from the perspective now of several years, are apparent even as Danahay first defines his project:

I argue in the following sections that the primary characteristics of nineteenth-century male autobiography are an emphasis upon the ideal of autonomy and a corresponding nostalgia for the lost intimacy represented by community. Nineteenth-century autobiography, as the preeminent exemplar of an individualist ideology that privileged individual self-possession over the communal, records most graphically *the* masculine libidinal investment in notions of autonomy. Nineteenth-century masculine autobiographers inscribe themselves within their texts as autonomous subjects free from the constraints of any social context. (7, my emphasis)

"Masculinity" is rather simply defined here. Danahay makes numerous references to "masculine labor," "masculine writers," and "masculine autobiography" without exploring at adequate length what he means in his use of the adjective, beyond that which is "male" and (therefore?) invested in notions of autonomy. Masculinity is simply "not

femininity,” and therefore for Danahay there is, seemingly, only one “masculinity” to be studied.

This simplicity of definition does allow for beautifully focused chapters that probe masculine autonomy in autobiographical writings of Wordsworth, Mill, Gosse, Arnold, and others. Almost a decade after their publication, all of his close readings remain interesting and well-reasoned, and their precision and detail will continue no doubt to impact critical examinations of those primary texts for many years. But as a contribution specifically to a broad understanding of Victorian “masculinities,” as they are variously manifested and socially constructed, the tautological nature of the discussion makes this book’s continuing usefulness to the field in question here very limited. Danahay illuminates primary texts without illuminating “masculinity,” as even his notion of “masculine autonomy” goes undertheorized in its full relationship to nineteenth-century capitalism and other social processes. If masculine autonomy is a problem, what are its various social and material causes and long term effects? Only by addressing that question forthrightly can primarily archival research in Victorian literary studies be made relevant to twenty-first-century politically and socially engaged work, literary critical and beyond. Otherwise, to be quite frank, we linger in a flogging effort wherein “masculinity” is very well-defined as a problem, but one whose possible solutions are always conveniently off topic.

Of course “masculinity studies” itself is a problem in that what it actually comprises is quite murky. Indeed, the very vague line between “gender” studies and “sexuality” studies as they converge in “masculinity” studies is nowhere vaguer than in Christopher Craft’s *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850–1920*, from 1994. In pointing that out, I am not disparaging the book in any way; I think it is one of the very best contributions to the field ever published. What it usefully raises is a fundamental question regarding the parameters that we should set in addressing the relationship between gender as performance and the sexual desire generated by that performance. In discussing masculinity and “homosexual” desire, for example, do we mean, simply, the desire of one human being with a penis for another human being with a penis (masculine = male, as it seemingly does for Danahay) or are we in fact discussing desire that is thoroughly complicated *by* gender, pointing us toward new and more interesting discussions of, let us say, effeminate men who lust only after other effeminate men, or brutish hard-bodies who want a soft and seemingly yielding “other” with a very hard penis upon which to impale themselves? Are those forms of “masculine” desire, or is masculinity in such liminal cases a thoroughly and intriguingly fractured concept?

Craft never shies away from such difficult questions. Even his own relationship to his subject matter is presented as thoroughly complicated. Craft centers his discussion of Tennyson, Stoker, Wilde, and Lawrence on the intertwined nature of homosexual desire and homophobic reaction, using his own “admitted” heterosexuality (but certainly queer, extra-heterosexual longings) to talk in honest, sustained fashion about “the disciplinary constitution of a desiring male subject whose heterosexual security demands the continual performance of his ‘fundamental equivocation’: first the solicitation of this subject’s homosexual desire, then his repudiation of its possibilities in the real” (190). In addressing that dynamic he attends always to “the propagation and regulation of individuals, genders, and sexualities” (vii), with the pluralities there marking a sharp contrast with Danahay’s analysis.

Thus in Craft's standout discussion of *Dracula*, he raises issues of desire that shake the foundations of the novel, of Victorian genders, and of masculinity studies itself:

As the primary site of erotic experience in *Dracula*, [the] mouth equivocates, giving lie to the easy separation of the masculine and the feminine. Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses what *Dracula's* civilized nemesis, Van Helsing and his Crew of Light, works so hard to separate — the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the penetrative, or, to use Van Helsing's language, the complementary categories of "brave men" and "good women." With its soft lips barred by hard bone, its red crossed by white, this mouth swallows oppositions in order to announce a compelling (because phobic) disturbance of sexual difference. And it asks some disquieting questions. Are we male or are we female? Do we have penetrators or orifices? And if both, what does *that* mean? What about our bodily fluids, red and white? What are the fluent relations between blood and semen, milk and book? Furthermore, this mouth is the mouth of all vampires, male and female. It — and they — are both both.  
(74)

Stoker and Craft join forces here to abrade any feelings of security we may derive from a facile notion of "masculinity," disconnecting it from the mere possession of a penis, and allowing desire to surface in the stylized interactions between and among individuals of various biological configurations (male, female, vampire, and nonvampire, in all possible combinations). *That* is "gender and sexuality studies" at its most provocative and important, even as Craft never fails to address the discursive and social limits that continue to mitigate the larger impact of such abrasions and disruptions. His final paragraph at once evokes, criticizes, and identifies with the confused longing, denial, gender equivocation and retrenchment of D. H. Lawrence's (also very confused) male characters, ending his "unhappy story (the novel's and my own)" with the revelation of a "murderous exercise of an interminable grief itself indistinguishable from erotic longing" (190). Frankly, it is very rare that the writing and content of a work of scholarship makes me cry; Craft's final paragraph did. I cannot help but love a book that disrupts my own performance of masculinity (such as it is . . . ).

Just as intellectually engaging (even if I wasn't quite moved to tears by it) is Alan Sinfield's superb overview of Oscar Wilde's interrogation of and effect on late Victorian masculinities, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*, also from 1994. Sinfield immediately focuses on the enmeshment of queer sexualities and genders in pointing out that the "villain" of his book is "the masculine/feminine binary structure as it circulates in our cultures, by which I mean the supposition that masculinity and femininity are the essential, normative properties of men and women respectively" (vii) even as he explores how "same-sex passion was being represented in Wilde's time, as quintessentially masculine; then how the trials reoriented it" (vii). His purpose throughout is to trace how the "dominant twentieth-century queer identity . . . has been constructed . . . mainly out of elements that came together at the Wilde trials: effeminacy, leisure, idleness, luxury, insouciance, decadence, and aestheticism" (12). He does so beautifully, looking at historical and literary documents from before, during, and after the Wilde scandal, to isolate a "queer" moment of discursive reorientation. Thus *The Wilde Century* avoids isolating Victorian gender/sexual ideologies in sterile and artificial ways, going back as far as Shakespeare and then well into

the latter years of the twentieth century as it explores the morphyic nature of male behaviors.

My only quibble here (and in a way it mirrors my quibble with Danahay over his discussion of “masculinity”) is that Sinfield never pluralizes “effeminacy.” Just as there are femininities and masculinities, there are also many different effeminacies. Sinfield seems to define effeminacy simply as Wilde-like behavior — a sort of camp physical and verbal excess. But is effeminacy only that? Is effeminacy a limp wrist, a set of facial mannerisms, a way of crossing one’s legs, a certain posture? What combination of these and in what degree constitutes an “effeminate man”? Certainly “effeminacy” as a distinct and noticeable behavior pattern varies dramatically across cultures, nations, and even regions, a fact that Sinfield wholly overlooks. I remember talking with one exasperated heterosexual man from Virginia who exclaimed to me a couple of years ago that he hated California because *all* men there “act like fags,” a characterization that certainly surprised all of the Californians within earshot. We may, as Sinfield suggests, have a notion of what effeminacy is through a clear mental image (now primarily media- and especially film-driven) of Oscar Wilde, but that does not probe the complexity of effeminacy as a set of value-laden bodily performances that are not reducible simply to Wildean excesses (a far more nuanced treatment of this subject is provided by Joseph Bristow’s *Effeminate England*, which I have reviewed and recommended elsewhere).

But beyond that quibble, I greatly appreciate Sinfield’s attention to desire as well as to gender performance. He never ignores the fact that “we cannot assume that the available images of same-sex passion correspond to the desires, to the fantasies of individuals. . . . On the other hand, again, social codes and signals feed back into psychic realities; we should expect a complex interaction between representations and desire” (46). He goes on to read Freud’s conflation of gender and sexuality as reflective of time-bound, patriarchal ideologies, and ends his book by assessing “ways of handling the legacy of the Wildean model and the masculine/feminine binary structure today, and the further strategies we might pursue” (177). His suggestions, admirably to my mind, revolve around a proliferation of performances and a disconnection between gender performance and any reliance upon a notion of “normality”: “We need to be heterogeneous, contentious — without falling into blaming each other for the situation in which we find ourselves” (207). I agree wholeheartedly, though still wish to see even more work on what that heterogeneity might consist of, and how precisely desire is evoked through it.

Far less engaged with desire (and when engaged, problematically so) but more overtly interested in complicating male gender performances (in their great plurality) is Herbert Sussman’s rich, detailed *Victorian Masculinities*. Like James Eli Adams’s *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (which I have also recommended highly elsewhere), Sussman’s book is admirably well-focused; he explores the emergence of specific component parts of diverse Victorian masculinities through a reading of works by Carlyle, Browning, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the young Pater (Adams’s book, I might add, takes this discussion into the later years of the nineteenth century, and serves as a strong complement to Sussman’s). The complex critical vision of *Victorian Masculinities* is exemplified in this passage of thesis delineation:

The intensity with which male writers and artists fixed on the monk and monasticism . . . the disproportionate emotional energy expended on an anachronistic or, in its contemporary

manifestation, a socially marginal topic provides insight into the male anxieties of this time. In Foucauldian terms, that debate centered on the all-male world of the monastery and the monk as celibate male enables us to identify points of problematization in the early Victorian formation of a male identity. And the variousness and the incompatibility of these representations, the protean quality of the monk and of the monastery within this monastic discourse shows early Victorian masculinity not as a consensual or unitary formation, but rather as fluid and shifting, a set of contradictions and anxieties so irreconcilable within male life in the present as to be harmonized only through fictive projections into the past, the future, or even the afterlife. (2–3)

Sussman addresses early on the issue of his use of the plural “masculinities” to stress “the multiple possibilities of such social formations, the variability in the gendering of the biological male, and the range of such constructions over time and within any specific historical moment” (8). What follows such introductory statements is a series of rich and nuanced investigations.

To my mind, Sussman’s is one of the very best of the books under discussion here in its smart examination of the thorough complexity of a term — masculinity — often used very loosely. This is not to say that it is perfect, of course. I must admit, for example, some sustained discomfort with the book’s references to “Gay Studies,” as Sussman terms it. He generously acknowledges that “like any student of Victorian masculinities, I am indebted to the work done within the project of Gay Studies” (9), though even that sentence itself reveals the book’s simplistic use of a very complicated field. There is no single, identifiable “project of Gay Studies.” This oversimplification would not be much of a problem except for the fact that Sussman’s discussion turns at various times and in explicit ways to same-sex desire, arguing, for example, that a “new gay construction of masculinity was for the early Victorians also represented in a discourse of monasticism” (57). Of course “gay” is a late twentieth-century political term; even calling same-sex eroticism from the 1840s “homosexual” (as Sussman does at times) is highly problematic and certainly anachronistic. Carlyle did not and could not address a “new gay formation of manliness” (59), as Sussman argues. There was none at the time of *Past and Present*’s publication. There may have been new models of sexual dissidence, but Stonewall and the birth of “gay formations” of identity were well over a century away.

This, however, is a relatively minor distraction from what is otherwise a model work wherein speech patterns, degrees of self-control and emotional availability, forms of physicality, and other discrete actions and performances are analyzed as part of a complicated web of possible masculine self-presentations. Throughout his study Sussman draws beautifully on concrete textual references and imagery to pinpoint early Victorian crises of gender and sexual definition. *Victorian Masculinities* is a definitive book for its topic and set of authors.

Of course, Sussman and the other critics discussed above are largely interested in fictional and nonfictional writings, even though “masculinity studies” ideally should comprise analyses of many different media and cultural forms. Quite obviously, “gender studies,” whether examining masculinities, femininities, sexualities, or all of those, has an interdisciplinary scope. This is what drew me to the next book in our march through the 1990s: *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* by Joseph A. Kestner, from 1995. To a degree unparalleled in the other books reviewed here, it fully captures the field in which it

intervenes, at its best and its worst. Kestner's best chapters offer detailed readings of some compelling Victorian visual representations of men. His worst chapters, however, are floggingly (a new adverb I've coined here) repetitious, mechanical, and even unconvincing. To be sure, Kestner always admirably pluralizes his topic, commenting that the term "'masculinities' recognizes that the term 'masculinity' cannot be monolithic or essentialist in the sense of applying to all males, which would be to ignore differences among men of class, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity or nationality" (5). And like the best books here (such as Sussman's), Kestner's argues that "the representation of males in art both constructed the paradigm of masculinity and interrogated it/conflicted it by proposing inadequacies, fissures, inconsistencies and incommensurabilities in the prevailing paradigm" (19). These complications are examined through investigations of "five pivotal representations of males which evolved a paradigmatic masculinity for nineteenth-century British culture: the classical hero, the medieval knight, the challenged paterfamilias, the valiant soldier and the male nude" (42).

But the quality of those investigations varies dramatically. Kestner attempts to discuss so many paintings and painters that he often devotes only a couple of lines to a visual representation that demands much more attention. His book often reads like a descriptive catalog of images of men during the Victorian era rather than a sustained critical analysis of those images. At times this is "masculinity studies" as a simple listing of characteristics and their rate of occurrence. And this relative shallowness is especially unfortunate because when Kestner does discuss individual paintings at length his readings are often superb. His entire chapter on "The Challenged Paterfamilias" (chapter 4) is filled with nuanced and highly detailed examinations of both the patriarchal veneer and underlying fragility of the Victorian image of the father. In particular, his readings of images of economically disadvantaged and otherwise vulnerable adult men in paintings by John Brett, G. F. Watts, Ford Madox Brown, and Hubert von Herkomer examine in detail their poses, expressions, and broader settings. The visual representation of the father interacting in complicated ways with other figures and with social circumstances provides Kestner with a rich textual field upon which to draw.

That same richness is not apparent in his least successful chapter, that on male nudes. While he does offer some interesting analysis of why the Victorians avoided showing actual penises in their painterly depictions of unclothed men, much of his commentary on the prevalence of young, hairless bodies in Victorian paintings rests on a rather startling and unconvincing assertion: that such bodies always represent oversized phalluses. His commentary spins out mechanically from that assertion, wholly ignoring the fact that hairless, young male bodies can also (and even more credibly) be read as androgynous and considerably less aggressive, threatening, and phallic (in terms of cultural constructions of masculinity) than older, bulkier, and hairier bodies. Indeed, Kestner (again, like Sussman, but at far greater length) discusses male/male desire in problematic ways; his commentary on "homoeroticism," which draws far too quickly on Eve Sedgwick, erases the diverse forms of attachment and erotic longing that can exist within that very broad category. Like the Victorians themselves, Kestner seems to know well how to "figure" heterosexuality, but seems invested in a response to same-sex desires that is simplistic at best.

Much more convincing and supple in its readings of queer desire is William A. Cohen's *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* from 1996, a book that I wish

to mention briefly here. Cohen's book is not so much a study of masculinities *per se* as it is an examination of the ways fictions and constructions of sexuality circulate through culture, particularly through stories of deviant behavior by men. And this shift of emphasis marks a useful departure from the books mentioned above. Manifestations in print and painting of a wide variety of masculinities and male behaviors were by 1996 very well-charted by scholars in the field. Kestner's catalog of images perhaps exhausts forever a certain approach to the study of masculinities — their listing and breakdown into component parts. What Cohen does well is focus on the much more compelling issue of how norms of male behavior maintain a very fragile hold over the cultural imaginary. And fragile that hold is, for

however pious and disciplinary the public narrative scandal produces about private sexual transgression, though, its effects cannot be predicted according to formulas for ideological containment. While it inculcates an understanding of normative behavior in its audience, scandal also provides the opportunity to formulate new questions, discuss previously unimagined possibilities, and forge new alliances. A social drama that enhances the power of one group may at the same time disempower others; while it gratifies some, it terrorizes others. And while scandal teaches punitive lessons, often deliberately intended to induce conformity in its audience, its thrilling terrors always pose the danger of inciting disobedience to the norms they advertise. (4–5)

In probing the causes and effects of scandal in the pages of Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, and several high profile court cases (involving Wilde, as one would expect, and, more uniquely, two cross-dressing young men from a couple of decades earlier), Cohen demonstrates in dense and provocative readings the micro-workings of cultural continuity and change. His discussion of the simultaneous processes of containment and incitement that scandal involves is, of course, clearly relevant to the Clinton/Lewinsky spectacle a year or so after *Sex Scandal* appeared. If in the books discussed earlier in this review, Victorian masculinity studies reached a certain end point during the 1990s in terms of a basic cataloging of behaviors, perhaps through Cohen's definitive work and the experience of an unparalleled national "sex scandal" we have also substantially exhausted the opportunity to learn through observing and participating in scandal-mongering.

But, of course, scandal is not the only way gender-based behavior patterns are circulated and imperfectly enforced. One of the most obvious ways that masculinity might be "policed" is through the actual use of the police and legal system. This is the starting point for the next book I wish to mention, Angus McLaren's superb work from 1997, *The Trials of Masculinity*. This book serves as a wonderful complement to the best of the others mentioned above, because it examines a host of cultural documents — court records, medical texts, journalistic reports — other than literary representations, and it extends the discussion of masculinities through the last decades of the nineteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth century. Like its best predecessors, it also addresses forthrightly the complex intersection of gender and sexuality. Its purpose is well-stated and provocative:

My central argument is that the boundaries of masculine comportment, normal sexual behavior, and male gender identity were constructed and maintained by law, medicine, politics, and



popular ritual. When respectable society stigmatized what it took to be dangerous forms of male sexual behavior, it was not primarily preoccupied with protecting potential female victims. The first effect of the new models of heterosexuality was to shore up the power of “normal” men. This exploration of a discourse in which experts lamented the passivity of perverts while sanctioning aggressive male sexuality accordingly promises to deepen our understanding of both the realities and perceptions of early-twentieth-century gender relations. (7)

Through the time period he covers, McLaren traces the ways in which experts “exploited the stereotype of a virile, heterosexual, and aggressive masculinity” (2) to delimit male behavior in ways that met the needs of an industrial economy, a certain set of class interests, and their own specifically professional self-interest.

All of McLaren’s chapters are detailed and well-argued, as they examine the intertwined legal and medical sanctions directed against a host of “undesirable” types, including vagrants, murderers, sadists, and transvestites. Perhaps his most interesting and supple argument concerns the medical and legal category of “exhibitionist”:

A wide range of political and cultural rights were literally embodied and only enjoyed by members of the male sex. Yet a man who revealed his genitals in public was condemned by other men as a pervert or criminal. Why? Who was threatened by his actions? Contemporaries asserted that obviously women and children were endangered, but one suspects that those most involved in the discussion of exhibitionism had other preoccupations. (184)

Indeed, McLaren explores how exhibitionism came to be defined in ways that served clear class interests (a man undressing before his servants was not considered exhibitionist), in ways that reflected gender roles (if a man undressed in front of a window, he was an exhibitionist; if a woman undressed in front of a window, any man who happened to see her was a voyeur), and in ways that allowed for the policing of sexual norms (laws against exhibitionism were used most often as ways of controlling solicitations between men). In taking such complex and revealing medical and legal concepts, tracing their genesis and their application against “offenders,” McLaren offers eye-opening analysis of the changing limits of “masculinity” and of whose interests those limits serve. It is one of the stand-out books covered in this review.

And this brings us to the last book that I wish to mention here, which warrants relatively brief attention because it barely mentions the Victorian era, but which does point us toward certain future trends in the field under discussion. *Female Masculinity* by Judith Halberstam helps signal a useful end and new beginning to masculinity and gender studies. If masculinity is a (now well-charted) set of specific actions and behaviors — bodily, linguistic, attitudinal, and so forth — what social crises are engendered, so to speak, by women who adopt them? What the new field of “transgender studies” does clearly and admirably is allow us finally to disconnect gender behaviors from their supposedly “natural” biological correspondents. Halberstam’s purpose is distinct and seems to answer the call to “proliferation” issued by Sinfield several years earlier:

I am using the topic of female masculinity to explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity. Female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it has been vilified by heterosexist and

feminist/womanist programs alike; unlike male masculinity, which fulfills a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach. (9)

The questions that Halberstam asks as she probes these issues are dynamic. Why are masculine women perceived as such potent threats to social stability and why are so many responses to them violent in the extreme? In answering such queries, Halberstam examines texts from nineteenth-century sexology through (at much greater length) twentieth-century film, music, and performance art; her readings are well supported, but are also and always gutsy and imaginative. To be sure, not every one of her generalizations is credible — her overly broad claim that “men’s rest rooms tend to operate as a highly charged sexual space” (24) is rather startling, to say the least — but her joint interrogation of “the worst aspects of a culturally mandated masculinity” and exploration of “ways for women to pioneer forms of masculinity that change the meaning of modern gender and sexual identity” (109) is breathtaking at times. While this is a book that only occasionally glances toward the nineteenth century, it is one that all gender critics will wish to read and reflect upon.

And that brings us to the end of a decade of exciting work on and in masculinity. We still do not know precisely how masculinity intersects (let alone *should* intersect) with desire and what role it should play, if any, in the future of human interaction. But we do understand more fully its beginnings, component parts, and its “ends,” in the sense of whose ends it serves and how manifestations of it are supplanted or interrogated at times. To return to my earlier cliché, some of the horses of gender studies have reached the end of their life cycle and others have just been born. Clearly, however, there is still a lot of flogging to be done. In another decade or so, perhaps another review essay of this sort will appear, and of course there is no way of predicting its content. My own hope is that we continue to interrogate any essential link between reproductive organs and social behavior, to probe the manifold ways that certain men and women have always undercut the simple constructs that have appeared in print and visual representations, and posit new ways of allowing a mix and match set of gender options for all people. But at some point those horses too will go to meet their maker, and then what creature, great or small, will present itself for our serious but always ardent ministrations?

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