

explorations



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REVIEW

Katarzyna Więckowska. 2014. *Spectres of Men: Masculinity, Crisis and British Literature*. Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press

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“The more we delve into men and masculinities, the more is revealed of the complex dynamics of difference, subjectivity, power and identity, weaving their way across the social web,” as Stephen Whitehead (2007, 5) ingenuously summed up the fertile and stimulating field of contemporary men’s studies. Katarzyna Więckowska’s monograph is a significant contribution to the burgeoning area of research, and a unique publication in Polish academia, where men’s studies still occupy a peripheral position. Her book offers a comprehensive and wide-ranging, yet accessible and well-balanced, probe into the ever-changing, nebulous notions of masculinity. The author traces the evolution of theories about manly ideals via the lens of British canonical literature by male authors in a diachronic perspective. *Spectres of Men: Masculinity, Crisis and British Literature* encourages readers to embark on a literary journey through various epochs and social milieus, and discover the intricacies, ambiguities and paradoxes connected with the struggle to construct, assert and enact one’s masculine identity.

Więckowska’s historical analysis stretches from the Middle Ages to the twenty first century. Such a long time span has been chosen in order to indicate some recurrent motifs, trends and beliefs, i.e. the titular “spectres,” that continue to haunt successive generations, who try to accommodate masculinity to the realities of a given social order, underpinned by a network of myriad, mutable relations, especially those between nationality, class, race and gender. The first chapter of the book examines Medieval and Renaissance texts, saturated with fears of feminizing powers, and intent on organizing a stable, homosocial territory informed by Christian virtues. In the Elizabethan era the role of literature in negotiating the meaning of gender roles grew considerably, due to the invention of printing and development of permanent theatres, which became the sites of transgressive practices, such as cross-dressing, disrupting the apparently bipolar arrangement of genders. Więckowska demonstrates that the Early Modern period is characterized by a growing awareness of threats to the masculine status, associated particularly with the female body.

The eighteenth century, portrayed in the next chapter, brought further dissociation of gender models, for both men and women, confirming thus the performative and transient character of gender constructions. Men could stylize their manhood in accordance with the image of the libertine, the fop, the beau, the gentleman or, later at the end of the

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century, the sentimental man, or the Gothic patriarch. The writer notes that masculine models began to synthesize a number of traditionally feminine qualities with varying degrees of social approbation. Furthermore, pioneer novelists, such as Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Stern, realized the great potential that prose possessed for disseminating proper moral attitudes and regulating human behavior, and turned it into a battleground of competing, often contradictory, ideals of manhood.

Chapter three deals with the substantial transformation of ideas about manliness triggered by the Industrial Revolution. Thomas Carlyle's promotion of heroic manliness in the economic sector, as well as the growing popularity of the tenets of Muscular Christianity, championed by Hughes and Kingsley, pervaded the public discourse on masculinity in the first half of the nineteenth century. The leading sages and thinkers of the age insisted on building a proper manly character through self-training and toughening the body and spirit up. In this manner, they not only downgraded the significance of inborn attributes, but also acknowledged the inconsistency and volatility of masculinity.

Więckowska continues her examination of Victorian masculinities in the next part of the monograph. She submits to scrutiny the influence of colonial conquest and ethnic relations on the contemporary gender scripts, as reflected in adventure novels by Stevenson, Kipling, Conrad and Haggard. Apart from that, she tries to diagnose the *fin-de-siècle* crisis of masculinity caused, among other things, by general moral dissoluteness, aesthetic passion for material beauty and pleasure, rampant industrial changes, and the rise of the first-wave feminism, all of which evoked the feeling of "male powerlessness" (Więckowska 2014, 173). The author brings also the late-Victorian conceptions of madness and sexuality into focus, which helps to comprehend better the fluctuations of the notion of manliness at the turn of the centuries.

The fifth chapter discusses the gradual erosion of conventional representations of manhood, as heroic, self-sufficient and non-effeminate, precipitated by the physical and mental damages suffered by men during the First and Second World Wars. Despite some valiant attempts to reinforce the sense of male superiority and facilitate male comradeship, made for instance by D. H. Lawrence, the spirit of estrangement, ambiguity and confusion pervaded in the aftermath of both wars, as Więckowska claims (2014, 208).

The final section of the book constitutes a concise overview of diverse cultural, political and social circumstances reflected in a multiplicity of ideas about masculinities emergent in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. The author touches upon the rise of rebellious subcultures, return to conservative worldview under the rule of Margaret Thatcher, and crystallization of the pro-feminist stance among men's groups, pointing to the heterogeneity of the post-war conceptualizations of masculinity. Furthermore, she mentions the development of eclectic men's studies and queer studies, which opened new horizons in research on masculinities, and helped to dismantle the stereotypical construal of manhood as a monolithic and universal category. It is worth stressing that Więckowska enriches the analysis by demonstrating how the contemporary novel has responded to the divergence of manly models and frictions occurring among twentieth-century men's associations, struggling to preserve the sense of masculine subjectivity anew in the constantly changing world.

Spectres of Men: Masculinity, Crisis and British Literature provides a condensed and incisive examination of the history of masculinity captured in critical works of British

fiction. The monograph is an invaluable mine of information for researchers and students in gender studies, particularly men's studies, as well as literary and cultural studies, who will find it a worthy resource and inspiration for further exploration of the outlined aspects. The author remains alert to the potentiality of the texts she scrutinizes, and aptly encapsulates the points of convergence of masculine resonances at work in popular literature and culture. What is more, her analysis clearly supports the constructionist interpretation of gender as "a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end," to use Judith Butler's seminal expression (1990, 33). There is little doubt that Więckowska's ambitious attempt to embrace a wide spectrum of phenomena molding images of masculinity over centuries in a proficient, insightful and fresh way is successful.

REFERENCES

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