

Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Mitoko Hirabayashi

In “The Lady of Shalott,” King Arthur’s knights, on seeing her dead body, ‘crossed themselves for fear.’ This fear was caused by her escape from the private sphere into the public as, in other words, her attempt to undermine the gender boundaries. This scene seems to reveal Victorian males’ prevalent anxiety: the definition of masculinity. Masculinity is an ideological discourse as well as a behavior or value system. In fact, the rigid gender divisions in nineteenth-century Britain inevitably compelled men to assume distinctive gender personality in order to enhance their sense of masculinity. If gender dichotomy was strictly structured in the nineteenth century, how was power deployed so that masculinity became problematic and contradictory? In this essay I will examine masculinity in nineteenth-century Britain, particularly how it served as an arena for struggle. I will focus on the Victorian preoccupation with brotherhood and the “other” in my discussion because they appear to reflect male anxiety. In addition, I look at how masculine representations in Victorian poetry and art disclose such male psychic tension.

The study of masculinity as problematic of cultural formation is comparatively new, although the norm of masculine identity has long been investigated by anthropologists and sociologists. The idea that masculinity is culturally constructed has been promulgated by Men’s Studies and especially Gay Studies over the last fifteen years¹⁾. Not only does it challenge the essentialist view of maleness, but it also approves of plural rather than singular “masculinities.” Certainly this plurality would increase the potential of examining male anxiety in nineteenth-century literature and art. The monolithic male identity is undermined, and anxiety and conflict of male-male relationships can be explained productively.

As long as masculinity is regarded as a socio-cultural phenomenon, it changes over time and space, and is characterized by mutability and diversity.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the dominant masculine stereotype, or what Tim Carrigan terms ‘the hegemonic masculinity’ (86), serves as an ideological power. Inevitably, it subordinates other people (including males) due to the intimate connection between masculinity and social power in patriarchy. According to Carrigan, this differentiation of power structure is not only psychological but institutional (91). The hegemonic masculinity is, in other words, collectively supported and endorsed by many males. More importantly, it deploys power over women.

Although it could be said that men have always been the normative gender (Kimmel 11), gender relations were not exempt from change when industrialization drastically changed social structures in early nineteenth-century Britain. Firstly, it divided the workplace from the home, as middle-class men commuted on weekdays. This separation spacialized gender division: home became identified as the women’s sphere, the workplace as men’s. Indeed, according to John Tosh, a majority of middle-class men were still living at, or close by, their work premises in the mid-nineteenth-century, and many Victorian professional elite men spent their working hours within the home (49). We should also be attentive to the distinction between working and middle-class male society in the nineteenth century²⁾. However, the separation of spheres as gender division served at least as a mental compartmentalization for both. Men were largely ignorant of the domestic routine and the separation of function was apparently universal. Through this separation, and by the removal of fathers from the home or the household, male children grew up in the company of women. Furthermore, delayed marriage in pursuit of adequate income kept middle-class males longer at the feminized home. This lack of a father-figure as a model of masculinity threatened to shape male identity, which inevitably endangered patriarchy. In this sense Stearns’ remark that industrialization challenged patriarchy would be correct (49).

If male aggressive prowess gave way to self-discipline in early nineteenth century Britain, it confounded gender division, since self-discipline was regarded as a feminine attribute. Yet, in order to sustain male power, the difference between men and women had to be sharply emphasized. This is perhaps the main reason why feminine self-denial, instead of self-discipline, and its surrender to authority were required under the name of ‘the angel in the house.’ After all the “feminine” had to be disparaged to stabilize the “masculine.”

Masculinity in the Victorian age defined itself against women in the home and foreign-ness or racial “other-ness” abroad. Victorian theories of race justified a belief that other races were less evolved than Caucasian or white males, and consequently it was used as a justification for British imperialism. For example Carlyle in *The Nigger Questions* (1849) affirms male Caucasian superiority:

...heroic white men, worthy to be called old Saxons...decidedly you have to be servants to those that are born wiser than you, that are born lords of you; servants to the Whites, if they are (as what mortal can doubt they are?) born wiser than you. That, you may depend on it, my obscure Black friends... (327, 329)

According to this idea, inferior others or primitive people are innately closer to animal nature. White males with reason, wisdom, morality, righteousness, and valor represent “normal” human kind, and are superior to other races, and therefore it was regarded as inevitable that white males had power over them. Racial superiority is tied to dominant masculine ideology.

Carlyle’s faith in the supremacy of masculinity did not remain unchallenged. Changes in the legal status of women threatened the old male/female dynamic. Class mobility also undermined the assertion of the one class over another while imperialism became slowly discredited as an inhumane ideology. Yet, in reality, middle-class Victorians feared a collapse of boundaries, for it was conceived as degeneration or retreat from the rational mind. Therefore differentiation from women, lower classes, and other races was crucial in terms of the politics of masculinity.

While material reasons help to explain many aspects of masculine rhetoric, they do not provide every solution. To understand the politics of masculinity more fully and how it transcends issues of class and wealth, we need to bring in the conclusions of psychoanalysis. Kaja Silverman remarks that the possession of the penis connotes social power. Then she explains how ‘commensurability’ of penis and phallus inscribes into society as ‘the dominant fiction.’ She assumes ‘the dominant fiction’ may negotiate the social materialism and the symbolic order of psychoanalysis:

If ideology is central to the maintenance of classic masculinity, the

affirmation of classic masculinity is equally central to the maintenance of our governing 'reality.' Because of pivotal status of the phallus, more than sexual difference is sustained through the alignment of that signifier with the male sexual organ. Within every society hegemony is keyed to certain privileged terms ... The members of a group come to accept the same ideological representations as 'true' ... The dominant fiction consists of the images and stories through which a society figures consensus ... The phallus/penis equation is promoted by the dominant fiction, and sustained by collective belief...It relies for that purpose upon the dominant fiction, which works to bring the subject into conformity with the symbolic order by fostering normative desires and identifications.(16, 30, 44, 50)

Silverman points out the fragility of 'the dominant fiction,' and stresses 'it is imperative that belief in the penis/phallus equation be fortified... for it represents the most vulnerable component of the dominant fiction'(47). Her argument explains why this needs marginal men who do not identify with power and privilege. These males are totally excluded from masculine discourse, yet instead included as the "other" to enforce hegemonic masculinity. Silverman's remark is also important in explaining the concept of masochism, 'as the psychic mechanism produced by a sense of personal inadequacy in confronting the ideal' (Kestner 26). While the dominant fiction gives an "exemplary" model for males, it must evoke a certain anxiety, a fissure in a man's psyche. Males, in confronting ideal images, would feel a certain gap between socially accepted behavior and privately preferable behavior. It is hardly surprising that this "otherness" in males always threatens masculinity.

The Victorian age's preoccupation with brotherhoods seems to be an attempt to sustain the dominant fiction of masculinity. We can find several examples of brotherhood in Victorian society and its literature and art. Examples include real groups such as the Apostles of Cambridge and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and fictional societies such as those described in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-1889). Victorian males recognized that the hegemonic male sphere tightened their bonds in order to realize manhood. Eve Sedgwick, in her innovative work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), theorizes male bonding as 'male homosociality,' and remarks that such homosocial relations enforce male

dominance in patriarchy:

...in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. (25)

According to Sedgwick, homosexuality must be prohibited in homosocial, heterosexual society and a woman be “exchanged” (in reality donated) to strengthen the tie between men. Yet this triangulation subtly hides male-male desire. Although Sedgwick argues that ‘most Victorians neither named nor recognized a syndrome of male homosexuality’ (74), the discourse of male-male desire must have influenced Victorian writers in the mid-nineteenth century³.

Male bonding in reality seemed to solidify its tie by exchanging women between men. Tennyson’s sister Emily became engaged to his friend Arthur Hallam and Tennyson’s other sister, Cecilia, married his friend Edmund Lushington. Dante Gabriel Rossetti offered James Collinson, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to his sister Christina, although she broke off the engagement later when Collinson joined the Roman Catholic Church. It would be possible to add Rossetti’s love for William Morris’ wife, Jane, to the list. She often sat for Rossetti as his model and Morris seemed to have known about their relationship. Yet they kept a strange triadic relationship.

Male bonding in Victorian poems is also established and tightened by homoerotic desire through the female body shared by men. Lippo in Robert Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” tells male passers-by about his sexual experience at the brothels. However, male bonding is not without its problems. Carlyle idealizes the male society in a fictional monastery, St. Edmundsbury in *Past and Present* (1843), and yet he recognizes the interior division between the need of control over desire and a fear of its overflow. Masculinity in his fiction seems to represent the uncontrollable, innate male (sexual) energy. Herbert Sussman analyzes Carlyle’s ‘maleness’ as the following:

...maleness, potentially progressive, is also innately diseased. The very spring of male identity is also potentially the source of its destruction as dissolution. Repelled by the male body, by male sexuality, by what he sees as the

miasmatic swamp of the male psyche, Carlyle imagines the interior of the male as polluted, unclean. Masculine energy may power the engine of industrial society but it may also disrupt it in a power surge, an overflow of the diseased fluid interior in a flood that would dissolve the ego boundaries of the male self and the patriarchal bounds of the social system. (24)

On the one hand, the closed homogenous society of a brotherhood such as a monastery was able to maintain ascetic masculine codes which tie males together. On the other hand, conflict or unease might also surface from within them in condensed forms. Where self-discipline as a distinctive masculine attribute was required, the emotional overflow of folly, irrelevance, or madness had to be hidden.

Collective subjectivity of masculine identity holds the dominant fiction, while individual subjectivity unintentionally discloses its illusion. In this sense the normative masculinity in nineteenth-century heterosexual culture must have been in constant danger of collapsing from within. Difference can be found within. Given that masculinity needs differentiation by establishing the “other,” men should be displaced into such different guises as women or racial others in order to keep masculinity intact. Perhaps it is because ‘the [male] subject refuses to recognize an unwanted feature of the self’ (Silverman 45). If brotherhood has difference within, so could a single man. The “other” can be recognized as part of the self. Certainly, brotherhood seemed to be a congenial closet for Victorian males. Yet, as long as it was constructed on homogeneity and excluded difference, it was a vulnerable and critical site of masculinity.

Now I would like to examine briefly how male anxiety about masculinity is inscribed in nineteenth-century visual art and writing. “Rescue of woman” is one of the most popular themes in Victorian narrative representation⁴⁾. For example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti had been enthusiastically working on the narrative painting, “Found,” during the 1850s. Its subject is a country drover meeting his former lover, now a prostitute. In the final oil painting, his legs, stepping forward, appear stiff and seem to disclose his unwillingness to rescue her [figure 1]. Another pre-Raphaelite painter, Edward Burne-Jones, was also obsessed with the “rescue of woman” story. Between 1870 and 1890 he worked on three separate series featuring “Sleeping Beauty.” Curiously, he avoided the scene of the princess’s awakening – the prince’s kiss scene – in the series, explaining his

reason thus:

I want it to stop with the princess asleep and to tell no more, to leave all the afterwards to the invention and imagination of people, and tell them no more (Lutchmansingh 126)⁵.

He not only avoids fulfillment of the rescue story, but also seems to suspect manly rescue by the prince. As Larry Lutchmansingh remarks, in the first Briar-Rose series, the prince's position shows his resolution of the quest: his gaze is directed forwards, and his legs and the drawn sword are placed in accordance with his resolute movement [figure 2]. In contrast, the prince in the second series does not appear particularly willing to perform the quest [figure 3].



figure1



figure2



figure3

‘[H]e stands apart, his legs ambiguously suggestive of both hesitation and imminent action, his rueful gaze directed to a distant point, his sword held impassive at his side, and his shield held as if to shut off the view of his defeated forerunners’ (129). Both painters choose the masculine performance of rescue as their theme, and nevertheless, the paintings themselves undermine their apparent subject.

Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” reflects male internal contradiction in nineteenth-century Britain. While the lady’s attempt to leave the private sphere seems to threaten Arthur’s kingdom or the Victorian gender division, the poem ends with her death and Lancelot’s words that ‘[s]he has a lovely face.’ In other words, she evokes male anxiety and at the same time is contained in the masculine gaze.

Since masculinity is socially constructed, each male writer and artist presents versions of maleness available to him within his culture. But male identity is not unified and the “other” is inevitably included within the self. It could be said that artistic representations are a site of contradiction and conflict of masculinity. Victorian poetry and art as discourse sustain and disrupt masculine ideology.

Notes

- 1) I regard Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men*, published in 1985, as an epoch-making for Victorian critics. .
- 2) Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*.
- 3) Dellamora remarks the influence of Walt Whitman’s *The Leaves of Grass* (1855) on English writers. See Dellamora 44-45.
- 4) As for prevalence of “rescue plot” in Victorian literature and art, see Adrienne Munich’s *Andromeda’s Chains*.
- 5) Originally this quotation is in *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones II*, edited by Georgiana Burne-Jones (London, 1904) . My quotation is from Lutchmanshingh.

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