

Men in Charge, Men Underfoot: Nineteenth-Century Masculinities in Private and in Public

A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England. John Tosh. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 252 pp.

Manly Leaders in Nineteenth-Century British Literature. Daniela Garofalo. Albany: State University of New York Press. 216 pp.

Reviewed by **Gwen Hyman**, The Cooper Union, New York, NY

<1> In recent years, the field known as “men’s studies” seems to have faded, alongside that other category known as the “men’s movement.” The latter conjures up images of men howling in the woods as a means of discovering their inner selves and of me-too narratives intended to garner a little understanding for the poor, put-upon folk who’ve suffered under the yolk of being in charge. In the place of such stuff, it is to be hoped, will rise a more well-integrated, theoretically coherent type of gender studies, which looks to all gendered actors as sites of worthwhile analysis instead of ignoring those who happen to have power (a problem I have taken up in my own work).(1) John Tosh’s social-historical *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* and Daniela Garofalo’s literary-critical *Manly Leaders in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* are important efforts to address this problem. These books take very different approaches to the study of nineteenth-century masculinities. Tosh’s work eschews an easy reliance on one-dimensional models of middle-class Victorian men as patriarchal oppressors in favor of a more nuanced, complex and sympathetic approach. Garofalo, on the other hand, asserts that the benevolent and wounded men who populate leadership narratives in the first half of the nineteenth century are not what they seem – and that the mask of democratic-liberal niceness functions not only to hide typically violent virile power, but also to enable it.

<2> Tosh’s highly readable and engaging *A Man’s Place*, now reissued with a new preface, was groundbreaking when it was originally published in 1999: it was the first comprehensive study exploring the effects of Victorian domestic ideology on middle-class men. The work is widely cited in studies of Victorian masculinities (including Garofalo’s book). In the new preface, Tosh writes that his objectives were not only “to test the proposition that men’s family life had a history, no less than their much studied public life,” but also “to offer some historical perspective on the current debates about men, masculinity and the family” (xi). He addresses critics who “took me to task for a gratuitous feel-good approach,” using a response straight out of the guiding principles of men’s studies: “I suspect,” he writes, “that the resistance to my approach is

still conditioned by an instinctive demonisation of Victorian men as prime exhibits in the historical gallery of patriarchal rogues” (xii). In other words: gender studies is still overinvested in old notions of women’s studies, unable (perhaps unwilling) to see beyond outdated notions of white middle-class men as inherently oppressive and repressive. The result? The inadvertent oppression of men, who deserve to be understood as more complex players in the game of gender and power.

<3> So far, so good. And certainly, Tosh’s work takes up precisely this question. Using case studies and advice books and synthesizing the work of other historians, he returns his subjects, generally analyzed only as public beings, to the realm of the home, and explores domesticity as a central measure of manhood; as a refuge from the alienating world of work; and as an overly feminized domain, an “unmasculine” space (7) where husbands, in an era of endlessly reinforced separate spheres, no longer easily understood their own roles. This last, he suggests, led eventually to a masculine longing for escape from the domestic.

<4> The body of the book is divided into three sections: “Preconditions”; “The Climax of Domesticity, c. 1830-1880”; and “Domesticity Under Strain, c. 1870-1900.” In the first section, Tosh traces changes to the middle-class household in the early part of the century. He takes up the transfer of men’s work out of the home; the rise of the suburbs; and the role of the home itself as a marker of status. He explores the popularization of the “Angel in the House” myth and the notion of the home as refuge from the alienating world; the role of religion in reinventing domesticity; the development of the cult of childhood and its effects; and sexuality and sex differences.

<5> The middle section of the book looks closely at men’s relationships to marriage, child-rearing and the life of the family at the heart of the Victorian era. Tosh looks to the difficulties of sexuality in marriage in the period; the “feminizing” of the home sphere as women increasingly assumed moral and practical authority for child-rearing and domestic management; the conflicting narratives of “domestic patriarchy” (61), companionate marriage and female authority in the home; and the many possible manifestations of fatherhood. Tosh claims that manhood was made by marriage: “[t]o form a household, to exercise authority over dependants, and to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and protecting them – these things set the seal on a man’s gender identity” (108). But the path to marriage and, thus, to manhood was arduous: “Attaining manhood could not ... be described as a natural process, or a matter of filling one’s allotted niche [but rather] ... a period of conflict, challenge, and exertion” (111). And that process was considerably complicated by the separate-spheres doctrine and the Angel in the House narrative, which put women in charge of the home and turned it into a feminized zone. No wonder, he suggests, that fathers anxious about instilling appropriate masculinity and self-sufficiency in sons who risked over-feminization in the home environment often tried tough love, discipline, and the hyper-masculine public schools. No wonder, as well, that some men sought other refuges away from the theoretical refuge of home, in clubs, improvement societies, and so on. Even here, men encountered impossible demands: a perfect home life was a requirement for men in public life, despite the fact that home life invariably suffered when men were busy conducting public lives. Men, in other words, were overloaded with conflicting sociocultural expectations, hamstrung by the hyper-domestic rhetoric of the day, and sidelined by women’s growing authority in the home.

Small wonder, then, that, as Tosh asserts in the third section of the book, men in the latter part of the century increasingly turned their backs on domesticity. Faced with all this difficulty – not to mention legal reforms that undermined patriarchal authority in the home, the emergence of the New Woman, and so forth – they might well consider marriage more trouble than it was worth.

<6> Tosh's narrative is compelling; he is an excellent storyteller, and his portraits of the men who constitute his case studies are particularly well drawn. The work is heavily annotated, satisfying, wide-ranging and well argued. Where material feels slightly worn (Garofalo, for instance, references a body of work disputing the notion of separate spheres), one imagines this is due in no small part to the influence of Tosh's own work. Difficulties do, however, emerge from Tosh's methods. Tosh states in his "Note" on the subject that he has "made little use of demographic data" (198). Instead, he synthesizes the work of other scholars, and illustrates his claims with his case studies, garnered from letters, diaries, advice books, and the like, an approach evocative of women's studies work. But the method may not, perhaps, be best suited to such an extensive undertaking: without the backup of stats and studies, it leads, perhaps unavoidably, to sweeping statements and, in places, lack of convincing evidence.(2) Though he gestures towards the proliferation of categories of middle-class men, for example, he neglects to pin down or define those categories. Since his case studies include a farmer, a banker, a doctor, a priest and teacher, a mill-owner, an exciseman, and a lawyer, it would be helpful to understand the different social pressures and expectations adhering to differing "types" of men. Similarly, the tricky ideas of manliness and gentlemanliness are undertheorized: these concepts have engaged many critics writing on men in the period(3) and their exploration would be helpful here.

<7> Though Tosh speaks in the Preface to critics' discomfort with the undermining of stereotype regarding the Victorian husband and father, the stickiest bit of the book, for me, was what struck me as a displacement of stereotype to wives and mothers who over-feminize their sons. This is not their fault, Tosh is quick to emphasize: it's culture. Still. Early in the book, Tosh asserts, for instance, that a woman who undercut her man's status as provider was suggesting he was "unmanly"; "for a wife to make this charge against her husband was to strike him at his most vulnerable point – sometimes at the cost of inciting him to violence" (62). While Tosh is surely not suggesting that women were to blame for domestic abuse, his choice of words is unfortunate. This is also the case when, in a later discussion of purity movements and women's work on regulating sexual behavior, he writes that "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the constant *harping* on sexual delinquency damaged masculine prestige in general" (155; emphasis mine). Perhaps most striking is a bit of pop psychology in the last section: Tosh suggests that young men, split between the "effeminate" upbringing their mothers provided and the self-denying, unloving culture of manhood they learned from their fathers, were often incapable of meaningful relations with women. Thus, he argues, "[t]he yearning for the feminine, instead of being pursued in courtship, was invested in the sentimentalized memory of the mother" (184) or in more or less sexual relationships with other men, in which "[m]en who had been denied the warmth and affection which they craved from their fathers sometimes grew up determined to find those responses in other men" (184-85). In other words: too much feminization not only alienates the father from the home: it can turn boys into mother-lovers or turn them gay. (Cue the Bates Motel?) The conclusion, reasserting the text's connection to the men's movement, brings these stereotypes home: here Tosh writes of Robert Bly's 1990 *Iron John*, the unofficial bible of the

men's movement, citing Bly's "attempt ... to recover a 'deep' masculinity on behalf of men who have grown up in feminized homes" (195) as akin to the experience of the Victorian middle-class man. Apparently, women's authority in the home is still damaging men, 100 years on and counting. Tosh's hugely important work has been instrumental in opening up the notion of the middle-class man as a creature formed by and formative of the domestic sphere, which is, of course, a microcosm, for the Victorians, of the nation itself. His sensitive and nuanced reading of men's behavior embraces contradiction and defies stereotype as it sheds light on a much-overlooked and central area of Victorian society and culture. And, as he notes in his preface, "*A Man's Place* remains the only work to explore in depth the relationship between men and domesticity in Victorian England" (xi). It is to be hoped that, as the implicit challenge this statement poses is taken up, gender scholars will be able to bring such care and attention to gendered players on all sides.

<8> Where Tosh looks to ordinary men, Garofalo is interested in "great men." *Manly Leaders* argues that in Britain from the 1790s to the 1840s, idealized masculine leadership embodied a sort of double-layered identity, forged in large part in reaction to the French Revolution. The British, she claims, sought leaders who covered over their virility – described variously as natural mastery, aristocratic superiority, and violence – with a veneer of benevolent softness. This double layer, Garofalo argues, facilitates the narrative of enlightened British liberal democracy and, in itself, leads subordinate subjects to desire their subordination. And Garofalo, too, engages directly with issues around contemporary masculinity. She writes,

today's familiar narrative of beset masculinity in gender and literary studies claims that modern masculinity is experienced as inauthentic, vulnerable, and flaccid. Scholars have celebrated this masculine disempowerment as evidence of cracks in the patriarchal edifice. However, [her reading] suggests that weakness is a particularly powerful means of subduing others in modern times ... nothing is more dangerous than a vulnerable man compelled to recognize the failure of his virtue and virility. The spectacle of manly ruin maintains things as they are. (51)

<9> Garofalo's book is divided into four sections: an introduction and three sets of paired chapters. The first of these explores William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and Byron's *Sardanapalus* (1822). The first section looks to the development of the apparently benevolent leader as a "modern" (37) construct, beginning with the apparently modern and beneficent Ferdinando Falkland's secret murder of Barnabas Tyrrel – an act, Garofalo claims, which neatly sums up the hidden violence Godwin sees beneath chivalric liberal democratic leadership. She explores the relationship between Falkland and Caleb Williams in terms of the layering of liberal democracy and hierarchy, arguing that the very weakness of the leader creates a carnivalesque defusement of radical opposition to tyrannical rule. When Falkland publicly admits his culpability, Caleb's rage dissipates: he becomes a willing, guilt-ridden subordinate who mistakenly sees his master as a man victimized by the forces of chivalric law, instead of seeing that this law only functions when it is underwritten by violence.

<10> Garofalo takes up Byron's *Sardanapalus* as a critique of "nationalistic manhood" (53). The play posits, she claims, that weakness and "effeminacy" lie not in the king who refuses to fight on moral grounds but, rather, in the role-playing theatricality of war – and in the misogynist

association of battle with monstrous female violence. When Byron's pacifist Assyrian king finally takes up arms at the behest of his people, he does so as a highly theatricalized figure, suggesting that it is virility, not pacifism, that is the costume. Garofalo reads the king's no-exit decision to sacrifice himself and his material goods as "a reminder of the scandalous link between British claims to liberty and benevolence and British imperialism. This link allows benevolence to mask a dependence on various forms of unacknowledged coercion" (70).

<11> Chapters 4 and 5 bring together the radical Hazlitt and the conservative Carlyle. Beginning with Hazlitt's uncharacteristically protofascist *Life of Buonaparte* (1828-30), Garofalo argues that the writer despairs of the dissipated individualism and effeminacy of modern commercial culture. Hazlitt, she claims, fears that modernity has obviated the possibility of committing oneself to "a great cause" (71): it offers only a commodity fetishism of human experience, in which the endlessly multiplying, undifferentiated characters in novels and plays are consumed in place of real life. Hazlitt's solution is the strong man. Napoleon's rule as the embodiment of the state becomes the means of focusing his people and offering them identity in a great cause. His downfall comes from his failure to constantly repeat his theatre of authority: the soldier who will willingly sacrifice himself for the ideal that the Emperor embodies must be continually reminded, through the spectacle of violence, of what, exactly, that ideal is. Here weakness constitutes not a means of seducing the people into allowing hierarchical rule through liberal democratic rhetoric, but rather the fall of the idol, who "becomes a junk heap like the pyramids, worthless, unable to sustain a compelling memory of his past glory" (89). Hazlitt's own text, Garofalo maintains, is an attempt to solve this problem, by removing power from the realm of the image and giving it meaning, context and stability, a permanent memory. Unfortunately, she contends, the "tedium" of the text itself undercuts Hazlitt's project. His "imagination is exhausted by failure" (91) and ends without reasserting the aims of the Revolution. Ironically, this is the failure of the chapter as well, the least successful section of the book: it is overlong, and its ending is unsatisfying. The project of rehabilitating Hazlitt and understanding his frustrations is theoretically interesting, but it is never brought back to the book's overall argument.

<12> Turning to Carlyle, Garofalo claims that his heroes, too, embody an attempt to solve the problem of commodity fetishism – here posited as the substitution of empty advertising for actual experience. Carlyle sees the replacement of old hierarchies with acquisition of material items in industrial modernity; without social caste, objects become central instead of people, the transparent relationships between people are confused, and social unity fails. Carlyle, she writes, turns to the cult of the dead hero as a means of "bring[ing] the chivalric glamour of the manly ideal into the present so that it may energize industrial modernity" (100) while evading the problems of exposure to the public gaze, artifice, and false desire. Garofalo claims that, for Carlyle, funeral monuments are a powerful means of creating virile masculine communities precisely through the impossibility of seeing the thing that is represented: "Victorian men become men by mourning the dead" (107). Garofalo claims that the erotics of the dead hero create a possibility of union that, while endlessly deferred, is genuine and (in the persons of the followers of the dead) allows for genuine relationships between men. While the cult of the dead hero is in essence no different from commodity fetishism (a misrecognition, worship of, and desire for a signifier without a signified), it adds the crucial element of masculinity: "A phallic economy is necessary for Carlyle because without it capitalism lacks the necessary erotic power to motivate production and consumption" (111).

<13> The final section turns to the domestic realm. Garofalo first takes on *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), positing Darcy as a fantasy alternative to the chaos of the Revolution. The heart of her discussion here concerns Darcy's recognition that merit trumps hierarchy. His defeat of his pride, in his willingness to befriend Elizabeth's very middle-class aunt and uncle, is, for Garofalo, an effective strategy for rule, combining class, wealth, and merit while taking up the language of liberal democracy. Garofalo's argument here that "[t]he love affair between subordinates and their betters must take place in the register of merit in which master and servant look beyond caste to perceive an inner equality that renders them true companions" (127) passes over some important aspects of the text: Elizabeth, after all, is not Darcy's subordinate, since, as she tells Lady Catherine de Bourgh, "[h]e is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far, we are equal."⁽⁴⁾ Her claims about Elizabeth's "submission" and for the "devious and seductive" mode of rule Darcy embodies (130) require more textual evidence, but her assertion that "[b]y learning liberal manners, elite men most thoroughly seduce those very subjects who strive for equality and independence" (130) is a fitting synthesis of her compelling reading of Darcy's transformation and its implications.⁽⁵⁾

<14> In her final chapter, "Dependent Masters and Independent Servants: The Gothic Pleasures of British Homes in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*," Garofalo ably dissects the erotics of domination in Jane and Rochester's relationship, reading it as a figure for national rule. In this novel, she claims, those who seem to seek freedom really seek mastery. The text's use of apparently liberal language is not what it seems: Garofalo quite convincingly argues that what Jane longs for is not freedom in the feminist sense, but rather freedom from boredom. The text, she claims, "represents a certain kind of liberal democratic commitment as the ultimate means by which the relationship with the master not only survives but also thrives as the only modern adventure worth having" (138). The Gothic in *Jane Eyre* (1847), she claims, functions as an ideology that actually reconciles "the belief in equality and in superior men who possess the natural right to rule" (144). Garofalo's reading posits Jane as a democratic creature whose "strength is stimulated by [Rochester's] mastery" (146); she "cannot be mastered but ... must choose her own master" (147). In a final reprise of the double-layered leader, Rochester's inner virility – his masculine strength – is paired with his outer debility, so that Jane is seduced by the appearance of weakness and need.

<15> Garofalo's arguments throughout *Manly Leaders* are compelling, and her readings of her central "manly leaders" complex and careful. Its faults are mostly in the area of execution. I could have wished for a greater level of engagement with scholarship on the theory and practice of dominance and submission (Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* [1995], for one). Structurally, Garofalo has a tendency to anticipate herself, offering her argument before she examines the text under discussion; this habit disrupts the pleasure of discovery, and also creates difficulties for her in terms of some weak or only tangentially related conclusions. This is true of the structure of the book itself: at the end of the Brontë chapter, *Manly Leaders* comes to an abrupt halt, conclusion absent. And, like Tosh, Garofalo sometimes skips over close readings of circumstances and characters around her men: how is gender and class obviated for Jane Eyre, exactly? The project, however, is really interesting, and it makes an important contribution to the field, offering a new and provocative means of understanding manly rule, and masculinity itself, in the first half of the nineteenth century.

<16> Both Tosh and Garofalo directly address the paucity of rigorous work on masculinity in the British nineteenth century. It seems a pity that it is still important, at this late date, for Garofalo to point out that “gender was a crucial category for Britons in their attempts to control democracy” (5); a pity, too, that Tosh’s assertion that the subject of men and domesticity in the nineteenth century is “less familiar ground to historians than it should be” (2) remains correct. It is to be hoped that new scholarship will build on important and provocative works like these in a way that enriches the field of gender studies.

Endnotes

(1)Gwen Hyman, *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009).(^)

(2)James Eli Adams takes up the question of evidence in his 2001 review: writing of Tosh’s lack of empirical evidence regarding domestic sexuality, he suggests that “Michael Mason has shown the wealth of information to be gleaned from published materials, while novelistic representations of domestic life are often rich in their erotic intimations. (This is one point where the work of historians and literary critics could be richly complementary.)” James Eli Adams, review of *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, *Victorian Studies*. 2001. AccessMyLibrary. 2 Aug. 2009 <<http://www.accessmylibrary.com>>.(^)

(3)See, for instance, Robin Gilmour’s important *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981), and Adams’ *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), as foundational texts in this area.(^)

(4)Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970): 272.(^)

(5)Her assertion that “[t]he very act of recognizing equality of merit creates new forms of pleasurable subordination” (127), and that subordinates are “fixated by [the] fantasy” of equality, which ironically “depends on the frisson of inequality, on the thrill of the aristocratic man’s condescending gaze” (131) is less compelling, since the character who most strongly experiences this thrill is Mrs. Bennet.(^)