

Defining Masculinity: Class, Nation, and Consumption

The Mighty Scot: Nation, Gender, and the Nineteenth-Century Mystique of Scottish Masculinity. Maureen M. Martin. New York: State University of New York Press, 2009. 206 pp.

Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel. Gwen Hyman. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009. 309 pp.

Reviewed by **Daniela Garofalo**, University of Oklahoma

<1> Two new books on masculinity studies in the Victorian period examine the effects of modernity on constructions of gender. Maureen M. Martin's *The Mighty Scot: Nation, Gender, and the Nineteenth-Century Mystique of Scottish Masculinity* offers a timely study of the significance of Scotland for Victorian conceptions of gender. Whereas much work has been done on Scotland, gender, and nationalism in the Romantic period, focusing primarily on Sir Walter Scott, Martin argues convincingly that the representation of Scotland in the later period needs further examination. For Martin, the fantasy of "primal" Scottish masculinity "gave middle-class Englishmen access to an imagined Scottish wellspring of masculinity" (2) so that "Scotland could be narrated as Britain's masculine heartland" (3). In other words, Englishmen could reconnect with a more primitive masculinity by engaging in sports such as deer hunting while still occupying their privileged positions as modern, civilized members of the empire. But this view of a primitive, masculine Scotland was associated almost exclusively with the Highlands. Lowland Scotland, much like England itself, was a modern center of commerce, industrial development and intellectual advancement. The Highland conception of masculinity created problems for Scottish men's own sense of identity because the "identification of true Scottishness with Highland culture mystifies and displaces historic Scottish nationhood, shifting it from history and politics to the safer realm of myth and romance" (9). As a result, Lowland culture tends to be written out of Scottish history (10). The fascination with an outdated and primal masculinity speaks to a nation haunted by the past, by its defeat, and its incorporation into the union. Yet, this representation has difficulty coming to terms with modern Scotland and its associations with commerce and modernity.

<2> Made up of five chapters and an introduction, the book attempts to understand the complex and contradictory ways in which the union with England was represented and the difficulties of representing the Scottish nation in modern times. The first chapter examines Scott's *Redgauntlet* (1824) and John Everett Millais' painting *The Order of Release* (1853). It claims that the trope of

marriage offered one way to understand the union. These works suggest an England “virilized by its appropriating embrace of its ‘wild’ northern neighbor,” which offered “relief from the softening effects of modern life” (17). But the obsession in these texts with the 1745 rebellion suggests for Martin that the trope of marriage is not as conclusive as it might seem and that to some extent Scottish masculinity could remain “thrillingly and alarmingly other” (38). The second chapter studies the Victorian obsession with deer-stalking: as “much of the Highlands was turned over to deer in the course of the nineteenth century, to the detriment of crofters and sheep-farmers, privileged Englishmen gained a vast playground” in which to connect with their masculinity (42). Chapters 3 and 4 consider Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* (1886) and *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). Martin argues that Stevenson’s novels represent the difficulty of creating a feasible sense of masculinity for Scottish men, most of whom lived in the Lowlands and had little to do with “the mythic masculinity of valiant Jacobites” (81). The Highland mystique creates not only a homoerotic desire, but also a “homophobic paranoia” (121).

<3> The final chapter is arguably the most interesting. Unlike many books on masculinity, *The Mighty Scot* does not forget women. If Englishmen focused primarily on Highland masculinity, some Scottish artists looked to women to understand the nature of modern Scotland. Martin points to late nineteenth-century literary and artistic efforts to imagine Scottish femininity as a solution to the problems raised by Highland masculinity. Examining the novels of Margaret Oliphant and the work of the “Glasgow Style” artists, Martin points to their interest in the Celtic past, which tended to “challenge the popular notion of Scotland as essentially masculine” (132). The Glasgow Style offered a “machine aesthetic” (150) that spoke to Glasgow’s modern industrial development while emphasizing images of femininity. Both Oliphant and the Glasgow artists “draw on the Victorian convention of the angel in the house, while they also reconstruct her for a new, liberated century” (160). But the angel is not a passive figure; rather, she is “endowed with a natural authority that can extend beyond the private realm of the home” (160). If the view of a feminine Scotland could eschew the deadlock created by Highland masculinity and could incorporate the modern present, it was not an influential view of the nation. For Martin, this suggests the enduring power of the “English and Scottish ideological investment in the myth of Scottish primal masculinity” (162) throughout the nineteenth century.

<4> As innovative and important as much of this study is, one might find fault with the tendency to repeat the same claims about masculinity in most of the chapters and one might wish for close readings that offer up less predictable conclusions. However, the last chapter on femininity makes up for much of the earlier repetition and offers an interesting association of women with the modern. This point might be further developed, as so much of the book focuses on how primal masculinity was understood in opposition to modernity. This book will be useful for scholars of nineteenth-century literary studies and art as well as scholars of nation formation and gender.

<5> Gwen Hyman’s *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, on the other hand, offers some interesting close readings of Victorian texts that yield some unpredictable conclusions, particularly in her chapters on Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. However, unlike Martin’s book, its larger claims seem less persuasive and important. Throughout six chapters that examine authors from Austen to Stoker, Hyman focuses on male characters’

ingestion of food, alcohol, opiates, women, and blood. She offers useful explanations of the class coding of consumption and its complex relation to gender. The book examines specifically the alimentionation of gentleman who, for Hyman, find their class and gender status particularly threatened in the period. Hyman studies the problem of defining gentlemanliness in a context in which middle-class and aristocratic ideals of gentlemanly conduct clash and where lower-class forms of aliment can sometimes appeal more than sophisticated fare.

<6> Novels such as Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) reveal competing modes of consumption and gentlemanliness so that Knightley's well-controlled appetite, which fosters community, is undermined by Woodhouse's stagnant and unsociable consumption of lower-class gruel, while Arthur Huntingdon's alcoholism, sign of aristocratic leisure and uselessness, functions as a challenge to the middle-class "striver" who is defined by use. Accounting for the effects of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Hyman argues that the "horror of the novella lies in the untenable, unlivable place where the belief in labor as a social good and the belief in leisure as the ultimate personal and social achievement clash in the very impossibility of the middle class itself" (178). Hyman's argument might be more credible if she offered a more thorough historical analysis of why she thinks the middle class experienced a crisis of self-definition. The chapter on Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) does not shed much new light by approaching the novel through the topic of gentlemanly appetite. That the men in the text seek "to obviate boundaries" and "to create a sense of shared purpose and understanding that overcomes modernity, solipsism, and even time and space" (231), but that this search leads to the kind of blood lust exemplified by *Dracula* does not tell us anything very new about the novel.

<7> Hyman is more interesting in her discussion of Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) and Collins' *The Law and the Lady* (1875). Hyman argues that the novel, in the character of Arthur Clennam, attempts to imagine a form of consumption that undermines capitalist excess and gluttony. Clennam is horrified by "the monstrous appetites of the economic gentlemen around him" (121) whose consumption deprives others of sustenance. At first, he tries to solve "the social dilemmas of the market system" (121) by starving himself but, in the course of the novel, his gentlemanly body transforms into "a communal body," opening itself up to a "flourishing vision of community life" (123). Clennam no longer turns his back on industrial and commercial modernity but seeks, rather, to create a "transactional community" based on "reciprocity" (123). Well aware of the "politically fraught" nature of this "utopian capitalist optimism" (124), Hyman offers a close reading of the novel that captures its tortured complexity and strangeness.

<8> Arguably the most interesting chapter is on Collins' little known *The Law and the Lady*. The chapter is primarily a study of Miserrimus Dexter, "a legless, truffle-cooking, Burgundy-drinking, physically abusive, lascivious madman" (127). Although he seems to speak to an outmoded form of gentlemanliness (he has the "handsome face and flowing hair of a Romantic poet, the hands of a woman, and the frilled dress of an aristocrat from the previous century" [127]), Dexter is, in fact, a kind of hybrid gentleman. Hypermobility in a mechanical chair that allows him to move at great speed so that rather than being "defined by lack," he is actually "a creature of excessiveness, of power and horror derived not from his missing limbs but from his imbrication of the industrial machinery of the chair into his very self; he finds potency

in his truncated physical form” (135). While denying the boundaries “between man and machine” (137), Dexter also challenges the difference between aristocratic gentleman and the new “striver” middle class. He is an “avatar of venerable gentlemanly tradition” (140) wedded to industrial speed and technology: “Here old and new, past and present come together in the rush of the wheels as Dexter rockets down the room, embodying historical figures while he drives himself along at breakneck speed on his mechanical appendages” (141). As such, he is “a nineteenth-century cyborg,” “the Next Big Thing, a gentlemanly prototype for a new era” (142).

<9> If the readings of individual novels offer up such interesting “fare” (culinary metaphors abound in this book) as cyborg masculinity, the book’s larger claims often come across as undeveloped. For example, Hyman does not explain why she focuses on the novel when concerns about masculinity, class, and consumption can be traced in any important genre of the period. Readers will also want an explanation of why she chooses these particular novels and not others. Furthermore, the claim that masculinity is in crisis, so often echoed in masculinity studies, is not self-evident and might benefit from a more careful historical analysis than Hyman offers. This is one of the strengths of Martin’s book, which locates the problem of masculinity in a specific national context after the trauma of union. Hyman’s book raises several questions that are not fully answered: Is the crisis of manliness specific only to gentlemen? Why are men who have actual power and wealth so troubled by the problem of gender identity? Is the crisis of gentlemanly masculinity greater, different, more interesting in the Victorian period than at other times? Furthermore, her reason for her primary focus on gentlemen seems unconvincing. She claims that critics have “written a great deal on women and their appetites” as well as on the “appetites of working-class men” (10). Hyman states that her concern is to make “the gentleman visible through his alimental practices” (10). But gentlemen have hardly been invisible and if critics have not always been as attentive to their consumption of food and drugs as Hyman is, they have certainly focused on their desires, ambitions, class fears, and gender anxieties which are, after all, very much the subject of this book. *Making a Man* offers illuminating and thoughtful readings of some texts and will be useful to Victorian scholars more for its parts than its larger argument.