Testing Manliness in Late Victorian Speculative Fiction

Patriarchy's Creative Resilience: Late Victorian Speculative Fiction. Michael Kramp. New York and London: Routledge, 2024. 261 pages.

Reviewed by Jiwon Min, Oxford College of Emory University

<1>Michael Kramp's *Patriarchy's Creative Resilience* is a recent addition to the Routledge book series "Among the Victorians and Modernists," which publishes monographs and essay collections on the diverse aesthetic, political, social, technological, and scientific innovations that emerged during the Victorian and Modernist periods. This book tests the resilience of white male supremacy through various literary creativity in late Victorian speculative fictions. Produced between approximately 1870-1901, these speculative works engage with themes of futuristic technology, alternate realities, and the supernatural, often merging elements of science fiction, fantasy, and gothic horror. Common motifs such as time travel, extraterrestrial life, and dystopian futures provide social commentary on issues like class disparity, imperialism, and industrialization. Kramp reads both prominent works such as Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) and Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* (1884), as well as lesser-known texts, including Walter Besant's *The Revolt of Man* (1882) and *The Inner House* (1888), Thomas Anstey Guthrie's *Vice Versa; or, A Lesson to Fathers* (1882), and Alexander Craig's *Ionia; Land of Wise Men and Fair Women* (1898). The book also incorporates female writers such as Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett and Lady Florence Dixie into its analysis. While Kramp's readings are well-balanced and well-articulated, the project's strength lies in its engagement with Victorian thinkers like Carlyle, Newman, Kingsley, and Hughes who identified "pervasive and well-documented" (14) threat to the national order, and how late-Victorian speculative fiction strategically restored patriarchal systems to diffuse anxieties and reinforce a sense of security for British men.

<2>At its core, Kramp's project delineates "a failure of imagination," while simultaneously highlighting "the versatility and resourcefulness of patriarchy" (14). Chapter one begins by examining how nineteenth-century thinkers "accentuate the dangers with supposed crises of masculinity" and deliberately deploy these anxieties to conserve white supremacy (25-6). Kramp identifies Thomas Carlyle as a pivotal figure whose ideas shaped Victorian responses to "timid masculinity," one who asserted how men perceived as frightened were deemed unfit to uphold patriarchal authority. Kramp illustrates Carlyle's belief that the courage and efficacy of great men would secure order and restore sovereignty. Similarly, Charles Kingsley stresses the weakening of minds and the enfeeblement of British men, implying that the decline of manhood imperils the nation's future. Kramp provides a thorough examination of Victorian patriarchal thinkers and their consistent portrayal of rising female authority, deteriorating racial purity, and the ineffectiveness of governing democratizing communities as existential threats. This pervasive Victorian vexation, in turn, equipped speculative fiction writers with versatile imaginative tools "to dramatize concerns about the national race, justify the preservation of patriarchal authority, and even develop eugenicist policies rooted in a disciplined, regulated, or monitored male sexuality" (47-8). Consequently, late nineteenth-century speculative fiction became fertile ground for constructing new or lost worlds, envisioning future societies, and describing different peoples—all in service of restoring and maintaining patriarchy.

<3>Kramp's most compelling analyses are driven by insightful close readings of various speculative fictions. While the Introduction and Chapter One discuss the "subtle, innovative, or conniving measures" (63) to safeguard white male supremacy, Chapter Two, which focuses on *After London, or Wild England* and *News from Nowhere* illustrates how speculative narratives modify and reimagine England to sustain "mechanisms for men to *become hegemonic*" (63). By legitimizing men's power as hegemonic, both Jefferies and Morris succeed in securing "the voluntary subservience of women and others" (65). According to Kramp, the novels exemplify Victorian ideals of masculinity, which fueled "a hegemonic system that was malleable, welcoming, and purportedly beneficent" (66). However, this system was grounded in an ideology that reinforced a naturalized social order by valorizing the fulfillment of prescribed gender responsibilities. This social order was further upheld by domestic institutions—such as marriage—that prioritized men's desires, with women consenting to maternity and domestic duties. Chapter Three then reveals "an array of possible cultural dangers, including class inequality, the proliferation of technology, racial degeneration, and of course, Victorian feminist activism" (94) in *Flatland* and *The Coming Race*. Both Bulwer-Lytton and Abbot demonstrate the perceived necessity of patriarchal structures to

control disruptive and violent women. To alleviate Victorian cultural anxieties surrounding these "dangerous" women, the control systems in *Flatland* and *The Coming Race* rely on persuading "potentially explosive women to remain happy and preserve men's ostensible right to dominate (97)," all while preventing women from exercising their latent powers.

<4>In Chapter Four, two alternative-history novels, Walter Besant's *The Revolt of Man* and Thomas Anstey Guthrie's *Vice Versa; or, A Lesson to Fathers* present how British society might function if men's power were significantly weakened. Both novels construct "alternative history to incite sympathy for desperate men, indict women and other subordinate subjects for threatening men's naturalized rights and pleasures, and dramatize justifications for the need to restore" (128). These manipulated timelines incite "hyperbolic displays of masculinity" that repeatedly highlight the importance of male bonding and activities through parodic enactments and theatrical performances of hyper-masculinity, ultimately reaffirming male supremacy. In Chapter Five, Kramp augments the critical conversations on the authoritarian mindset and the cultural conditions that have fostered fascist regimes by treating "authoritarianism as a reliable and versatile patriarchal strategy—a strategy that showcases the extremism as well as the ingenuity and resiliency of white male supremacy" (162). While critics often view authoritarianism as a radical political solution, Kramp presents nineteenth-century speculative fictions, specifically Besant's *The Inner House* and Alexander Craig's *Ionia: Land of Wise Men and Fair Women*, to showcase "how men *become authoritarian* by reacting differently to dystopian accounts of a degenerate Victorian spirit of reform" (163). In other words, Besant and Craig depict innovative methods of manufacturing crises and urgency to restore patriarchy. They show how men learn from, react to, and revolt against dystopian visions to assert their exceptionalism. However, as these authoritative male figures justify legal reforms, exceptional actions, and even violence to reestablish patriarchal order, they simultaneously manipulate disparate cultural crises, respond in contradictory ways to security systems, and exploit both gender identities and sexual behavior (194).

<5>In the concluding chapter, two feminist utopian visions, Lady Florence Dixie's *Glorian; or The Revolution of 1900* (1890) and Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889) are presented as if to counterbalance the "prominent issues of the Victorian period that continue to affect and divide women: political and legal rights, public and personal health, economic stability, educational opportunities, the condition of masculinity, etc." (201). Nonetheless, by engaging explicitly with the gender politics of the late-Victorian period, *Gloriana* and *New Amazonia* ultimately endorse heteronormativity,

conventional marriage, and underline eugenicist practices. *Patriarchy's Creative Resilience* is an inspiring book, impressive in its comparative breadth and remarkable in its discussion of cultural, economic, legal, and ideological structures. Kramp effectively uncovers hitherto subtle or latent networks of discourse that restage our usual reference points for the study of patriarchy and late nineteenth-century speculative fictions. His use of comparative materials and his in-depth analysis of a variety of literary and non-literary texts are both focused and thought-provoking, especially as Kramp demonstrates the flexibility of white male supremacy and how "Patriarchy is not static; it has and will continue to adapt, respond, and reenergize its resources" (222). *Patriarchy's Creative Resilience* is a much-needed reawakening, challenging conventional ways of interrogating white male supremacy, not only in the past but also in our present and future.