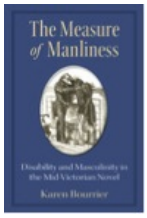
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THE MEASURE OF MANLINESS: DISABILITY AND MASCULINITY IN THE MID-VICTORIAN NOVEL



By Karen Bourrier
(Michigan, 2015)
Reviewed by Arden Hegele on 2016-02-28.

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According to his reviewers, Henry James ought to have called his novel about Isabel Archer not *The Portrait of a Lady* but *The Portrait of Two Gentlemen*. "The real power of the book," wrote R. H. Hutton in *The Spectator*, "consists in the wonderful pictures given of Ralph Touchett and Mr. Osmond, which have rarely been equaled in fiction" (qtd. 104). Taking her cue from Hutton, Bourrier asks us to consider what James's novel would have been like had he chosen the alternative title--drawing readers' attention not to the woman's dynamic self-fashioning, but to two contrasting versions of inert, invalid masculinity.

In Bourrier's estimation, James's portrait of Isabel Archer masks the more interesting likenesses of her many male suitors. These contrasting sketches of late-Victorian manhood are grown-up versions of stock characters that James developed from those earlier conceived by mid-Victorian novelists as disparate in style and scope as Charles Kingsley, Charlotte Yonge, Dinah Mulock Craik, and George Eliot. These masculine types differ from one another by their physical capacities. On one hand, the muscular Lord Warburton is a "perfect type of the Englishman" (109) and Caspar Goodwood, an American oarsman, is the "archetypal self-made able-bodied man" (111). On the other hand, Gilbert Osmond combines connoisseurship with genteel invalidism, Ralph Touchett is a true invalid, and his father Daniel is a sick man tenderly cared for "by a man who is weaker than himself" (108). By tracing the genealogies of disabled and able-bodied male characters, Bourrier shows how the juxtaposition of the two governs the formal structure of James's *Portrait* and of mid-Victorian novels more generally.

Thirty years after Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Bourrier's claim that pairings of men in English novels constitute a "formal innovation in literature" (2) is a well-rehearsed one. Yet Bourrier generates fresh readings of Victorian novels by using a Sedgwickian lens to see why, in George Eliot's words, "the lavish mutilation of heroes' bodies . . . . bec[a]me the habit of novelists" during the Victorian period (qtd. 1). Examining fiction by James, Eliot, Charles Kingsley, Charlotte Yonge, and Dinah Mulock Craik, Bourrier discovers that the pairing of contrastingly abled and disabled male figures--often in some version of Sedgwick's homosocial triangle-- allows *both* men to undergo a curious kind of mutual self-development. The "strong man," Bourrier writes, either a muscular Christian or a captain of industry, is usually a silent type; his suffering and self-development are narrated by the loquacious "weak man" whose "oddities" serve to "fill out" the "otherwise illegible contours of the protagonist's normalcy" (3). The relationship between these men sustains them both: "The weak man is more unexpectedly an emotional support for the strong" (14). Bourrier assumes--perhaps too easily-- that the Victorian "cult of the invalid" did not distinguish between "illness," "weakness," and "disability" ; the term *disabled*, she writes, is itself anachronistic to the Victorian period, when the condition of being categorically unwell could include chronic experiences of pain and fatigue (16).

Though present readers may find this unequal yet symbiotic relationship between "the strong" and "the weak" disturbingly Darwinian, mid-Victorian novels regularly feature it by means of names with contrasting connotations. In novel after novel, as one elaborate endnote reveals, the adventures of strong Toms and chivalric Guys are retold by their companions--weak Franks, Philips, and sometimes Charleses (8):

> Examples of [strong] characters named Tom include Kingsley's Tom Thurnall, Eliot's Tom Tulliver, and Hughes's Tom Brown; Guys include Guy Morville, Lawrence's Guy Livingstone, and Craik's Guy Halifax. For weak men, Franks include Kingsley's Frank Leigh and Frank Headley and Lawrence's Frank Hammond, while Philips include Eliot's Philip Wakem and Maugham's Philip Carey. (138)

In the exception that proves the rule, the hero of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) is the weak-sounding Franklin Blake, while the villain is Godfrey Ablewhite, whose name combines "able" with overtones of racism and Christianity.

But according to Bourrier, these pairings of able-bodied and disabled men offered more than just a spectacle of physical and psychological suffering; through the legible contrast between the men's bodies, they also commented indirectly on society. For instance, both Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) and Kingsley's Crimean novels, *Westward Ho!* (1855) and Two Years Ago (1857), juxtaposed masculine suffering with Christian duty and authorship. When read together, Bourrier tells us, these texts reveal that the foil to the laconic, muscular Christian hero is, perhaps surprisingly, not the colonial "other" he encounters when abroad, but the weak mirror-image he meets back home--his "brother, friend, or rival" (29). In these early mid-Victorian texts, weak and strong men affect each other, and the physical suffering they share

through both disability and war turns them into narrator-figures within each text. In Kingsley and Yonge's novels, Bourrier contends, "weakness and disability are necessary conditions for Christian manliness" (51).

In Dinah Mulock Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), however, invalidism is no longer a prerequisite for Christian moral rectitude, but rather a (muted) challenge to the rise of an industrial version of heroism, "a natural response to the cult of the businessman-hero who never took a rest" (57). Building on Thomas Carlyle's portrait of the captain of industry as a silent and self-controlled man of business, Craik's portrayal of John Halifax through the words of his disabled friend Phineas Fletcher neatly solves the problem of depicting a protagonist who is essentially taciturn. The strict boundaries between cultures of industry and invalidism are softened in this text by Phineas' homoerotic desires for John Halifax, at which one of Craik's reviewers raised an eyebrow: "During the early part of the tale, it is difficult to suppress a fear that Phineas Fletcher will fall hopelessly in love with John Halifax, so hard is it to remember that Phineas is of the male sex" (qtd. 70). But in the eyes of Phineas, Bourrier notes, the silence of John's response to this adoration confirms the true greatness of his character (64).

Bourrier's argument grows more compelling when this relatively simple pairing of taciturn hero and voluble, storytelling invalid begins to break down. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which Bourrier describes as Eliot's response to the schoolboy novel of the *Tom Brown* variety, the obvious strong man Tom Tulliver is paired with the disabled Philip Wakem. Though they experience a brief moment of homosocial mutuality, this comes only when Tom is injured at school, so that "both are disabled," and the moment of shared support is fleeting (88). Instead of showing how able-bodied and disabled characters support each other, as previous novels had done, Eliot inhibits not just the friendship between Tom and Philip, but also a potential friendship of "the strong man and weak man sort" between Philip and Stephen (97). Unlike Craik's Phineas, Philip lacks the kind of sympathy that is conditioned by suffering and authorship, since he is "peevish" and "inert" (98), and "unable to draw out his strong friend's feeling to meet his own" (101).

Turning from Eliot to James, Bourrier finds in *Portrait* (1881) that able-bodied and disabled men are fully separated into discrete and uncommunicating units. Even though, she writes, "the hearty industrialist" and "the sympathetic invalid are a pair that would have seemed familiar to Victorian readers," James keeps all of his men in almost completely separate spheres. He knew this was an unconventional choice, for as Bourrier explains, James was "steeped" in the novels of Mulock Craik, Kingsley, and Yonge, which featured interactive male pairs, and Osmond owes his malevolence, if not exactly his "masochism," to Eliot's Grandcourt (106-107). But instead of supporting each other, Ralph and Goodwood irritate one another as Henrietta Stackpole, the novel's "strongest man," manages their shared journey back from Rome. As an invalid voyeur who shapes the direction of the plot by means of the capital he controls, Ralph crosses the divide between the self-made man and the weak man: strangely like Osmond, he is a connoisseur who--to paraphrase Madame Merle--has made a career of his invalidism (117). In the end, though *The Portrait of a Lady* may very well be *The Portrait of Two* (or perhaps *Four* or *Five*) *Gentlemen*, each of these men is presented in static isolation from each other--leaving them with very little room to affect each other, and hence very little room for personal growth shaped by mutually reinforcing masculinity.

In mapping a "trajectory from an uncomplicated and improving friendship between the strong man and a weak man to a rivalry to almost no relationship at all" (123), Bourrier clearly shows how patterns of disability and homosociality shape narratorial technique and what Alex Woloch calls "systems of characterization" in mid-Victorian novels (qtd. 18). Necessarily and enlighteningly, Bourrier's evaluation of disability as a defining characteristic of Victorian manhood complements other accounts of masculinity in Victorian fiction, such as (most recently) Philip Mallett's edited collection, *The Victorian Novel and Masculinity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Though she might have explained more capaciously how Victorian invalidism made narrative time more flexible, she aptly affirms that "illness and recovery can help us appreciate the subtleties of narrative form" (17).

Persuasive as it is when applied to mid-Victorian novels, Bourrier's argument about male pairings prompts us to wonder how it might be applied to novels dating from both before and after the mid-nineteenth century. In earlier fiction, important and interesting male dyads that don't so neatly fit her paradigm include such queer and/or physically distinctive masculine pairings as Godwin's Caleb Williams and Mr. Falkland, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and his Monster, and perhaps even the young Dickens's Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller. As for later fiction, Bourrier's conclusion finds her masculine pairings living on almost up to the present day--first in the novels of E. M. Forster and Somerset Maugham and then, rather unexpectedly, as a "pedagogical tool" in late twentieth-century fiction for school-children (133). But what new things do we learn in fiction from the homosocial pairing of a disabled man with an able-bodied friend? Readable and stimulating to the end, Bourrier's book leaves us wanting an even more capacious historical and formal framework to accompany her detailed, articulate close readings of mid-Victorian tropes of character.

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