

H-France Review Vol. 10 (January 2010), No. 5

Todd W. Reeser and Lewis C. Seifert, eds. *Entre Hommes: French and Francophone Masculinities in Culture and Theory*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 289 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-87413-024-9.

Review by Christopher E. Forth, University of Kansas.

In recent years the study of men and masculinities has become quite an industry. Despite the emergence of some important work in and on France, Germany, Italy, and Russia (to name just a few national cultures), it is in Britain and the United States that this dimension of gender studies has been most fully explored in the humanities and social sciences.[1] While scholars of France are hardly alone in their apparent lag behind scholarship in these countries, the editors of *Entre Hommes* propose some intriguing and persuasive reasons for the relatively underdeveloped state of masculinity studies in France. They suggest that French ambivalence about identities, marked by such vectors of difference as gender, sexuality, race or class, may lie at the heart of the problem, where a republican emphasis on abstract notions of citizenship has often frustrated attempts to accord special rights to certain groups. Resistance in the 1990s to the proposed *parité* measures, which aimed at rectifying the low number of women in French politics, was also grounded in concerns that such a move towards *le communautarisme* would be at odds with a republican focus on universals.

In such a context, as the editors persuasively show, addressing issues of masculinity—much less breaking down this category into smaller variants or masculinities—becomes especially problematic: “to mark a traditionally unmarked group makes even less sense than to mark groups already considered as marked...like the *universaliste/communautariste* debate over *parité*, it may be the very tension between marking and unmarking that best defines French approaches to gender” (p. 19). Although the editors don’t explain why even in Anglophone countries “work on French and Francophone masculinities, while expanding quickly, still lags seriously behind that on English-language (con)-texts,” they claim that one of the “primary objectives” of *Entre Hommes* is “to help rectify this imbalance and to begin to sketch out how French/Francophone studies and masculinity studies might intersect” (p. 14).

The ten chapters that follow the introduction move chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present and cover a range of texts and topics. Despite this organizational scheme, the volume does not aim at coverage. The Enlightenment and Revolution—in fact most of the eighteenth century—are largely bypassed, even though these periods witnessed some particularly profound transformations in French gender relations and representations. The nineteenth century is also ignored save for chapters on Napoleon and Barbey d’Aurevilly. The chapters themselves represent a spectrum of different methodologies, from theoretically driven readings of one or more key texts to studies that situate textual analyses in a wider context. The line-up of authors includes both established and younger scholars. Rather than present a detailed description of each chapter, I will discuss what I see as some highlights of the volume before moving on to more general impressions. My focus and assessment reflect my own bent as a cultural historian who—while seeking to remain open to interdisciplinary approaches—prefers to examine how gender works in identifiable contexts.

Jeffrey N. Peters's chapter, "Is Alceste a Physiognomist?" presents a rich intertextual analysis of the relationship between "heart" and masculinity in the seventeenth century. Focusing on the protagonist of Molière's comedy *Le Misanthrope* (1666), Peters seeks to understand what Alceste meant when he rather incongruously associated speaking from the heart with manliness. The answer lies in a complex analysis of how the heart was represented in humoral medicine, anatomy, civility, and philosophy. This discussion is executed quite well and sheds light on the close interplay between medical models of the body and masculine ideals.

Margaret Waller's "The Emperor's New Clothes" also focuses on the body in its analysis of Napoleon's sartorial strategies. What fashion historians have, following the psychoanalytic theories of J. C. Flügel, sometimes referred to as a "Great Masculine Renunciation" in male dress around 1800 finds an important qualification in Waller's chapter. Rather than a wholesale male embrace of austerity and uniformity of dress (à la Flügel), Waller sees in the ornate and colorful uniforms imposed by Napoleon an attempt to "channel male narcissism" into styles that merged individual preferences into the regime. What was taking place was neither a rejection of display nor a celebration of individuality, but a flamboyant affirmation of male sobriety. Waller shows how Napoleon nonetheless used his own fashion sense to distinguish himself from the rules he imposed on others, thus positioning himself as being "above" such vanity while reinforcing his political authority. This is a very interesting chapter, but at times it drifts from claims that are supported by evidence to more speculative interpretations. For instance, some of Waller's analyses rely on assumptions about the "short, slight...build" of "the little big man who would be emperor" (p. 133). Although not a specialist, I have been under the impression that the emperor's height was misrepresented by English caricaturists and was not of much concern to contemporaries.^[2] This would be a mere detail had Waller not suggested that "rejecting elaborate sartorial ornamentation of rank helped Napoleon stand tall—despite his diminutive stature—among his subordinates" (p. 132), which assumes his small size as a fact rather than an effect of propaganda. If Waller has concrete information about the height of the emperor and how it affected his sartorial choices and relationship with his subjects, she does not present it. Otherwise this is a most impressive chapter.

In a fascinating chapter on Jean-Paul Sartre, Lawrence D. Kritzman tracks the philosopher's notorious analysis of "the slimy" ("le visqueux") in *L'Être et le néant* into several of his other works, notably his biographies of Charles Baudelaire, Jean Genet, and Gustave Flaubert as well as his own autobiography, *Les mots*. In these works, male subjectivity is dependent upon successfully extricating oneself from the viscous maternal body and the mother's imperious gaze, both of which threaten to keep the male stuck in a slimy immanence that is the principal enemy of masculine transcendence. Baudelaire tried to do it and ended up, through his immersion in dandyism, simply becoming "feminine" in another way. Genet's life followed a different trajectory: abandoned by his mother early on, the delinquent youth allowed himself to be feminized by accepting the label that others gave him ("thief"), which was for Sartre a form of symbolic rape. Genet's subsequent homosexuality was thus a second feminization already anticipated by the first: for Sartre, anal intercourse reflects identification with the lost mother. In contrast to the experiences of Baudelaire and Genet, Flaubert's mother was present but remote, and this, too, affected his fragile emotional make-up. How such ideas are played out in Sartre's self-analysis in *Les mots* makes for engaging and illuminating reading: while Sartre too faced similar obstacles as a child, he was able to rise above them in a heroic act of male rebirth.

Several chapters on the wider Francophone world show how a focus on masculinity can also be useful in these areas. In his study of *L'Enfant noir* (1953) by the Guinean writer Camara Laye, Jarrod Hayes offers a compelling reinterpretation of a novel that has been widely considered idyllic and thus not sufficiently anti-colonial by many Guinean nationalist critics. Hayes's rereading persuasively shows how, by being forced to suffer the indignities of a French colonial school as well as the brutality of forced labor, the protagonist of *L'Enfant noir* experienced a kind of separation from a mother culture and profound disruption of his identity. Rather than being insufficiently anti-colonial, Hayes suggests,

Laye's novel can also be read "as an allegory of his colonial alienation" (p. 242) that was at odds with the more masculinist vision of nationalism promoted by others at the time.

As with any edited volume, one could raise questions about the topics not addressed or the rationale for focusing on some authors and periods rather than others. On the whole, though, *Entre Hommes* effectively shows why gender remains a useful analytical category for literary and cultural studies and offers numerous examples of how a focus on men and masculinities can be productively used by scholars in French and Francophone studies. I was nevertheless surprised to see how few of the contributors have dipped into some of the now standard works on men and masculinities *outside* of French literary studies. In the introduction, for example, only French and Francophone theorists are discussed (Beauvoir, Sartre, Fanon, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Bourdieu), thinkers whose work has had an undeniable impact upon Anglo-American approaches to gender even though only a few actually addressed gender in any detail themselves. (One might recall that Anglo-American feminist theory has made productive use of Foucauldian thought, but not because Foucault had much to say about women.) Yet some of the chapters, especially those performing close textual analyses (such as those by LaGuardia, Hadlock, and Schehr), draw almost exclusively upon these thinkers with little engagement with any other resources on men and masculinities. Others (Kritzman, Chambers, Caron) focus on little more than the primary sources at hand and seem to require no other supports for their analyses. A number of provocative conceptual approaches to thinking about men and masculinities have been developed in recent years. R. W. Connell's influential notion of "hegemonic masculinity" may currently attract more sociologists than historians, but it remains an important development in the field that is worth considering. Some theoretically inclined literary and film critics make use of Kaja Silverman's analyses of male masochism in her important study *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*; yet they often fail to acknowledge the more recent contributions of David Savran and Sally Robinson, each of whom has shed important light on how male suffering has functioned in the West as a means of articulating "crises" of masculinity, most recently in response to the modest gains of women, homosexuals, and people of color. A deeper and more troubling analysis of male psychology may be found in Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, which examines how the denigration of the feminine contributed to the fascist mindset in Nazi Germany. Then there is the work of the classicist David Halperin, whose recent inquiries into the history of homosexuality represents a significant rethinking of the field.^[3] These are just a few of the conceptual innovations that have been made in recent years. True, some of these scholars bring French theory to bear on Anglophone gender cultures; yet, as with the feminist appropriation of Foucault, they have made these ideas work in relation to topics not generally (or at least not in a detailed way) considered by the original theorists.

In addition to not reading beyond the standard French theory, many chapters in *Entre Hommes* display little interest in contextual issues. This textual emphasis in French literary studies is fairly common. To the best of my knowledge, at least in relation to the modern period, there is an almost complete absence in French literary studies of anything resembling the "new historicism" or "historical turn" that has been so crucial among scholars of British and American literature since the 1980s and 90s. It is also true that many historians of France are often unwilling or unable to engage with "theory," even when it comes to reflecting critically upon contexts. One result of this lack of communication is limited cross-fertilization between literary scholars and historians. It is therefore rather telling that, in this volume of mostly textual studies, a select bibliography of scholarship on French and Francophone masculinities appears *at the end of the introduction* (pp. 40-50) rather than as part of the volume's bibliography of works cited. The implication that these bodies of scholarship really have little to do with each other is not a criticism of *Entre Hommes*—the volume seems mainly addressed to literary scholars who will probably benefit from what it has to offer—but a symptom of an unfortunate division among those studying French culture, society and politics. One can imagine interesting synergies and innovations were some of these disciplinary obstacles to be overcome, but at the moment scholars from different disciplines often talk past each other. These are not promising conditions for the development of French

masculinity studies, an area that in Anglophone academia really thrives on dialogues across the disciplines.

One place in which some consideration of scholarship on masculinities (Francophone or otherwise) might have been useful is Ross Chambers's chapter on Henri Alleg's *La Question* (1961), a memoir of being tortured by the French military during the Algerian War. What begins with a promising observation of how Alleg described his treatment as a kind of masculine ordeal—one in which being able to withstand pain validates not only his personal honor but even earns him the respect of his tormentors—becomes primarily a meditation on pain and manhood without reference to theories of torture and gender or even studies of violence and male honor.[4] Instead, Chambers focuses on rhetorical issues of defacement versus effacement rather than probing the meanings of such things in gender terms. The result is a discussion that adds little to our understanding of the interrelation of pain, manhood, and honor.

In conclusion, we might revisit the stated objectives of this volume. Given that the study of men and masculinities is at the moment relatively undeveloped in French literary studies, is it possible “to sketch out how French/Francophone studies and masculinity studies might intersect” without considering what “masculinity studies” is and/or how it is being done elsewhere? Or is the aim to develop a uniquely French/Francophone version of masculinity studies that has no need for the insights of other disciplines and methodologies or of work being done in other countries? Although it is not clearly spelled out, some contributors to *Entre Hommes* seem to prefer a more insular approach.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Todd W. Reeser and Lewis C. Seifert, “Introduction: Marking French and Francophone Masculinities.”

Peggy McCracken, “The Love of the Dead: Heroic Love and Heroic Masculinity in the *Prose Lancelot*.”

David LaGuardia, “On the Male Urge: Masculinity in Rabelais and Brantôme.”

Jeffrey N. Peters, “Is Alceste a Physiognomist?: Toward a Masculinity of Reference in the Seventeenth Century.”

Margaret Waller, “The Emperor's New Clothes: Display, Cover-Up, and Exposure in Modern Masculinity”

Philip G. Hadlock, “What Does a Man Want?: Masculinity and Storytelling in Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le plus bel amour de Don Juan*.”

Lawrence R. Schehr, “Colette and Androcentrism.”

Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Hauntological *mater* and Sartre's Family Romance.”

Ross Chambers, “Ordeals of Pain (Concerning Henri Alleg's *La Question*).”

Jarrod Hayes, “Idyllic Masculinity and National Allegory: Unbecoming Men and Anticolonial Resistance in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*.”

David Caron, “The Queerness of Male Group Friendship.”

NOTES

[1] For example, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, eds., *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002); Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Recent historical work on the French scene includes André Rauch, *Le Premier Sexe: mutations et crise de l'identité masculine* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2000); Rauch, *L'identité masculine à l'ombre des femmes: de la Grande Guerre à la Gay Pride* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2004); Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Régis Revenin, ed., *Hommes et masculinités de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2007); Christopher E. Forth and Bertrand Taithe, eds., *French Masculinities: History, Culture and Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2007); and Anne-Marie Sohn, *Sois un homme! La construction de la masculinité au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

[2] This is apparently an area of some disagreement, but not profoundly so. Frank McLynn indicates that, at age fourteen, Napoleon was officially measured at 5'3". Decades ago, Marcel Dunan claimed that after his death his height was mistakenly recorded as 5'2" rather than 5'7", roughly the average height for a French soldier and thus hardly cause for short jokes. Although Steven Englund puts Napoleon's adult height at 5'3", he still asserts that "contemporaries had not the obsession with the diminutive aspect of Napoleon's person...that posterity has had." See McLynn, *Napoleon: A Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 21; Dunan, "La taille de Napoléon," *La Revue de l'Institut Napoléon* 89 (October 1963): 178-79; Englund, *Napoleon: A Political Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 88.

[3] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992); David Savran, *Taking It like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 1*; Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Anson Rabinbach and Jessica Benjamin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[4] Works that offer provocative ways of theorizing masculinity and pain include Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, and Savran, *Taking it like a Man*. The best work on French honor remains Robert A. Nye's *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; and rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Christopher E. Forth
University of Kansas
cforth@ku.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of

more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172