

Katarzyna Więckowska

SPECTRES
of MEN

Masculinity, Crisis
and British Literature



Wydawnictwo Naukowe
Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika

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INTRODUCTION

Spectres of Men offers an analysis of the various ways in which hegemonic masculinity has been constructed, contested, and preserved in selected works of British literature. By reading a number of texts from the Middle Ages to the present, and by situating these works in the larger cultural milieu, this book describes some of the processes of othering that have been crucial to the formation of the successive models of manhood. Since the gendering of men has involved the exclusion of a number of elements perceived as unmanly at a given point in time, a part of this project is to delineate these elements, to illustrate their changeability, and to describe their gradual inclusion into the dominant image of masculinity. While the set of “others” against whom manliness has been defined is historically dependent, alterable, and expendable, *Spectres of Men* focuses primarily on the separations drawn along the lines of class, nationality, race, and sexuality, all of which are subsumed under the category of effeminacy. Effeminacy has played a key and constant role in defining hegemonic masculinity, although it has been variously attributed to different bodies, objects, or concepts. Therefore, one of the basic aims of the book is to show the multiple ways in which effeminacy has been conceptualised, and to outline the dynamic and mutually dependent relations between the notions of the feminine and the masculine, as well as their successive implications in the construction of value systems. Gender is not only an abstract category, but also a lived and embodied practice, and that is why *Spectres of Men* situates various models of masculinity within their specific social contexts, thereby giving them a history. It is a history of constant changes and shifting gender positions, and of subjects moving towards “terms of gender designations” that are “constantly in the process of being remade” (Butler 2004: 10). Historicising

gender may help explain why and how these terms have been remade, as well as suggest why some of them continue to be unchanged.

The major focus of this book is the dominant image of manhood that prevails at a given time, examined here on the basis of male-authored fiction and a selection of political, philosophical, social, and critical writings by men. By focusing on texts by and about men, *Spectres of Men* does not aim at excluding other texts or genders, but rather at examining a specific “system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world” (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985: vii). Masculinity is approached in this book as relational, formed against a set of others in a complex system of power networks, and therefore always addressing other genders and texts, even when, or perhaps particularly when such evocations are not openly acknowledged.

“Masculinity” is a key term employed in this study, and it is used to discuss the gendering processes in the works from *Beowulf* to the present despite the fact that it is a relatively recent concept. The first recorded usage of “masculinity” in England dates back to mid-eighteenth century, and it became synonymous with “manliness” only at the end of the nineteenth century (Smith 2004: 9). “Manliness” comprised the essential manly attributes publically admired in a man, and, by mixing “the ethical” with “the physiological,” it provided the paragon of civic virtues and heroic achievement (Tosh 1994: 180–182). This moral dimension of manhood was absent in “masculinity,” which in the late nineteenth century described qualities shared by all men, regardless of their social position (Bederman 1995: 18). In *Spectres of Men*, “manliness” is used to describe nineteenth- and early twentieth-century models of manhood, and to stress the moral dimension of being a man. In most cases, however, “masculinity” is used to signify both a quality shared by all men and a specific script of manly behavior. The choice of “masculinity” is to highlight the impossibility of distinguishing between the “natural” and the cultural, as well as to stress the twenty-first-century perspective from which the analyses are conducted. Additionally, while the examinations in *Spectres of Men* demonstrate that there are always many masculinities at any point in time, “masculinity” is most often used in the singular to underline the persistence of the attempts to construct an image of a unified and stable male subject position.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity conveys this sense of the masculine subject as always already internally split and variegated, with

“masculinity” seen as a dynamic construct, which includes the dominance of men over women, relations of subordination between groups of men, complicity in global patriarchal privilege of men as a group, and processes of marginalisation along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and other differences significant at a given time (Connell 2005). R. W. Connell has defined hegemonic masculinity as a “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (2005: 39), and which, although it may not be the most common one, is the most visible form of masculinity, embodying notions of cultural authority and leadership (Connell 2001). *Spectres of Men* emphasises these notions of cultural authority and leadership by focusing on texts that have shaped the dominant ways of thinking about men, and whose influence persists throughout time to mould contemporary gender practices. Thus, for example, Thomas Carlyle’s ideas of ennobling manly labour continue to underlie contemporary concepts of work, and D. H. Lawrence’s dream of a society of men has provided a point of reference for a number of male writers and critics throughout the twentieth century to the present. The canonical works of these male “organic intellectuals” are read alongside their less known or influential texts and alongside texts by other, less prominent men in order to both illustrate the diversity beneath any dominant concept of manhood and to show the continuing persistence of certain themes, such as the link between manliness and capitalism, which, though variously defined, has continued to be made.

Gender designations are produced simultaneously across a number of sites and are often contradictory. My reading of literary texts against non-literary writings is to convey this sense of contradictoriness and to point to the variety of writings involved in the construction of the dominant model. The difference between the literary and non-literary is erased in many of the texts under discussion, and it is hardly possible to, for example, separate Charles Kingsley’s project of a better society based on healthy bodies from the muscular heroes of his novels, or to approach comments such as John Ruskin’s condemnation of Shakespeare’s Ophelia as a “weak woman,” who “fails Hamlet at the critical moment, and is not [...] a guide to him when he needs her most” (Ruskin 1871: 139) from the perspective of literary standards. Ruskin’s plan for educating women into their gender role through reading appropriate books makes the link between gender and literature explicit, and also suggests that the division into literary and non-literary works may be gendered as well.

Literature has played an important role in the re-production of gender categories, and the gendering of men has involved also the gendering of literary works, where some genres or forms, such as the epic or tragedy, are perceived as masculine, and others, such as the pastoral or the sonnet, are considered as emasculating. The gendering of literary works is historically specific, and continues to provide a regulatory framework as visible in, for example, the contemporary division into Chick lit and Lad lit, or the use of the *Bildungsroman* to record twentieth-century stories of initiation into manhood, thereby re-writing the eighteenth-century preference for “histories” and biographies over other, more “effeminate” kinds of fiction. The gendering of literature en-genders its readers: in 1982, Jonathan Culler noted that “reading as a woman is not necessarily what occurs when a woman reads: women can read, and have read, as men” (1982: 49), and in 2005 Alice Ferrebe summarised the masculine paradigm of twentieth-century *Bildungsromans* by describing their aim as one “to consolidate a community founded upon masculine principles of identity, and to console a gender anxious about its instability” (2005: 14). One of the basic assumptions of *Spectres of Men* is that literature, although it is not merely a reflection of a particular time or place, cannot be separated from the culture and society in which it has been produced, and that by reading literary texts, and by placing them against other texts of their times, a certain “system of significations” can be reconstructed. The texts are thus approached as products of specific historical and social conditions with the aim to disclose the “structure of feeling” – of “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (Williams 1977: 132) – that dominates a particular period of cultural production, and to note the culturally dominant, residual, and emergent elements present in these texts (Williams 1977: 132–134).

Raymond Williams’s description of culture as encompassing dominant, residual, and emergent formations provides the general framework within which the analyses included in *Spectres of Men* are placed, as well as the model within which the production of masculinities presented herein is situated. Williams describes the dominant formation as the hegemonic one, and the emergent as the new that has not yet been fully formed, but where “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created” (Williams 1977: 122). The residual formation is one that, although formed in the past, is “still active in the cultural process [not] as an element of the past, but as

an effective element of the present” (Williams 1977: 123). It is to be distinguished from the archaic, which is “wholly recognized” as belonging to the past and is fully assimilated by the dominant culture as what is “to be observed, to be examined, or even on occasion to be consciously ‘revived’, in a deliberately specializing way” (Williams 1977: 122). While some residues are incorporated into the dominant as idealizations or fantasies, the residual also includes those “experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture,” and may therefore support or give rise to new practices and forms (Williams 1977: 122–123). The impact of past formations and the ongoing emergence of new forms complicate the linear temporal framework and make evident the indebtedness of both the present and the future to the past. As a result, the culture of a given time cannot be seen as monolithic and stable, but as always in the process of being made and remade. It is anchored in the past, and it is destabilised by new practices and meanings, which can be either oppositional or alternative, and which Williams sees as emerging from “the excluded social (human) area” (1977: 126).¹

Spectres of Men refers to this model of culture as a process in order to account for the co-presence of dominant, residual, and emergent models of manhood, as well as to describe the procedures of incorporating the new and re-inventing the old that are inherent to hegemonic masculinity. Williams stresses that the emergence of the new is never a smooth process, and that it is immediately countered by an attempt at incorporating it into the dominant culture: as he writes, the “new practice is not [...] an isolated process. To the degree that it emerges, [...] the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins” (1977: 124). Within this model of ongoing cultural incorporation, the emergence of a new gender designation or a novel literary form is a necessary part of cultural production. It is not an abrupt disruption of the hegemonic present, though, but a series of departures from and returns to the old, and “a constantly repeated, an always renewable, move beyond a phase of practical incorporation” (Williams 1977: 124). As the readings gathered in this book demonstrate, the constant incorporation of the new into the dominant makes hegemonic masculinity an unstable construct, yet one that remains a key element in the gendering procedures that masculinise certain ideas, texts, activities, and bodies and feminise others.

¹ Williams points to two sources of the emergent: “the class and the excluded social (human) area” (1977: 126).

One effect that the emergence of the new produces is, according to Williams, a “regular confusion between the locally residual [...] and the generally emergent” (1977: 125). This is a specifically temporal confusion when the old may be mistaken for the new and the past may be taken for the future. Ultimately, this is a confusion caused by the question of inheritance, of recognising the past as “an effective element of the present,” distinguishing it from the new, and deciding what to do with it. Inheritance, Jacques Derrida writes, “is never a given, it is always a task” (1994: 54), about which we are reminded by the ghosts that come from the past, but that are always conjured by the present.² The spectres “return because it is we who want something of them” (Redding 2001), and their appearance leads to a temporal confusion since “one can never distinguish between the future-to-come and the coming-back of a specter” (Derrida 1994: 38).

In *Specters of Marx*, to which my book owes its title, Derrida describes the spectre as the element disturbing the linearity of time and history, but also making their movement possible since it is only by recognising the spectre as an effective component of the present that the new, always harboured in the old, may begin. The past is thus not only always part of the present, but also a condition for the emergence of the future, with the spectre being a reminder of “the radical and necessary *heterogeneity* of an inheritance” (Derrida 1994: 16; emphasis in the original), and sometimes merely of the possibility of having a choice. Like Derrida’s spectre, Williams’s residual haunts the present with memories of “human experience, aspiration, and achievement” which the current “dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize” (1977: 124). The residues are “a necessary complication of the would-be dominant culture” that open up routes into the future by enabling the present to reach back to the meanings and values which were created in the past, and which can be re-created in the next phase of cultural production (Williams 1977: 126, 123). Like the residue, the spectre is historical, it “belongs to the structure of every hegemony,” and it is always social (Derrida 1994: 4, 37, 151): it is conjured within specific historical conditions and power relations by specific texts and people. The spectre is neither mere fantasy nor an individual invention;

² The possibility to link Raymond Williams’s account of culture with Jacques Derrida’s description of spectres has been noted also by other critics. For example, John Toth connects Derrida with Williams in *The Passing of Postmodernism* (2010), a book in which he proposes a model of cultural analysis – spectroanalysis – based on Derrida’s concept of haunting.