



Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt (eds.), *The Victorian Male Body*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 272 pp. £24.99 (paperback). ISBN: 9781474428613

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Recommended citation:

Yeates, Duncan. 2020. Review of Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt (eds.), *The Victorian Male Body*. *Victorian Popular Fictions* 2.2: 131-126.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/UWYR4878>

In *The Victorian Male Body* the white male body is established and explored as a dominant but invisible paradigm of an era in which representations of masculinity were in constant flux. The aims of the book are to deconstruct and analyse in depth the workings of this unquestioned, yet crucial concept of Victorian society, with remarkable consideration given to how deviations from “normality” are used to represent other forms of masculinity in positive and negative ways. The book is divided into three well-structured sections. While the first proposes an understanding of the methods with which the ideal male body was promoted via socialisation, in sections Two and Three respectively the book methodically explores various other derivations of the masculine body, taking into account the layers of meaning inherent in fractured and unruly male bodies. These two sections analyse depictions of men with prostheses and those suffering with tuberculosis and corpulence to identify but a few examples of this wide-ranging study.

In section One, Alice Crossley argues that schools functioned as a method of socialisation for the male body. Her mapping of hierarchy and corporal punishment as a symbol of phallic supremacy identifies how a heteronormative environment implicitly prepared students for homosocial relationships beyond school age. The theme of socialisation of males into certain behaviours commensurate with the era from a labouring-class perspective is investigated to interesting effect by Joanne Begiato. The theme of the indoctrination of labouring-

class men into notions of manly behaviour is perceptive, with Begiato observing that for a labouring-class demographic “the highest object of life was ‘to form a manly character, and to work out the best development possible, of body and spirit, – of mind, conscience, heart, and soul’”(48). Tara MacDonald’s focus on the bodybuilder Eugene Sandow in the context of nineteenth-century eugenics frames an excellent exploration of the novel *Gallia*. MacDonald explores a highly unconventional and prescient novel which inverts many preconceived notions of Victorian female sexuality and gender roles. All the arguments throughout this section of the book are thought-provoking and nuanced, but it would have been interesting to consider the issue of the socialisation of labouring-class men from a more politicised perspective that included the hegemonic value of labouring-class male discipline to the middle classes.

The second section of the book focuses on fractured and fragmented bodies. Ryan Sweet explores the representations of the prostheses of pirates as a symbol of adaptive hyper-masculinity. This chapter’s reflections on the relationship between R. L. Stevenson’s own disabilities and notions of class mobility that conclude the chapter are worthy of much further investigation. The thread of the disabled body being reflective of a transgressive personality is further explored by Meredith Miller in her consideration of tubercular masculinity. Miller traces the depiction of Keats as a diseased and dissenting example of this archetype, exploring the tension between Romantic notions of self-reflection and Victorian notions of dynamism and progress. Focusing on depictions of these kinds of characters in *Daniel Deronda* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, Miller suggests that the lack of vigour evident in the diseased male body is in itself a critique of the active, dynamic masculinity of the age. The intersectionality between notions of masculinity, femininity and dandyism in relation to the body and the gothic is evaluated convincingly by Alison Younger, who places an appropriate emphasis on some of the very specific expectations for the perfect heteronormative body held by the Victorians. This approach forms the basis for her insightful analysis of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which she juxtaposes Hyde’s thinly veiled homosexuality with his aping of gentlemanly qualities that fall far short of the Victorian notion of the gentlemen. Younger’s exploration of dandyism in the light of Victorian notions of masculinity is also original and interesting. Ruth Heholt’s focus on the relationship between gender and ghosts provides some really fascinating ideas regarding the appropriation of the supernatural for the purposes of incipient feminism. Building on notions of the female ghost as representative of women’s invisible status during the era, Heholt investigates notions of the male ghost as an anomalous entity worthy of further academic study due to its occupation of an unstable position in the healthy mind and body dualism promoted by the Victorians.

This leads on to the third section of the book, which focuses on unruly bodies. Françoise Baillet’s deconstruction of *Punch* magazine as an arbiter and categoriser of bodies in an era in which class consciousness and social structure were coming to the fore is particularly engaging. Focusing on George du Maurier’s illustrations of aesthete artists whom he knew well enough to satirise, this chapter shows how these illustrations were used to explore tensions around the artistic body

and commonly accepted notions of Victorian masculinity as espoused by Carlyle. Baillet's focus on the various archetypes skewered by du Maurier is impressive and wide-ranging, although it might have been interesting to also consider these representations in the light of du Maurier's novel *Trilby*, with its written portraits of bohemian artists which seem to contradict the author's sharp satire in *Punch*. Charlotte Boyce's chapter investigates how depictions of Victorian dietary habits are reflective of notions of class consciousness that privileged middle-class restraint in dietary matters. Boyce observes that common depictions of labouring-class men as having voracious appetite commensurate with their lower-class status are complicated in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. The application of arguments around satiety, greed and class in this novel is both nuanced and insightful, adding further to the arguments around asceticism, the gentleman's body and Victorian values. In a chapter dedicated to transgressive consumption and bodily control in Wilkie Collins, Joanne Ella Parsons considers Fosco's transgressive corpulence in *The Woman in White*. Parsons surveys depictions of the corpulent male body ranging from the weak-willed to the villainous, and considers the relationship between food and Fosco, his wife and the opposite sex, and the masculinised women and feminised men like Fosco that populate Collins's novel. In "Sensationalising Otherness: The Italian Male Body in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 'Olivia' and 'Garibaldi,'" Anne-Marie Beller investigates how Braddon's poetry has been used to explore the accepted Victorian notions of masculinity. Identifying the Italian male body as other, Beller suggests that Braddon uses these exotic tropes of masculinity to better evaluate British notions of masculinity and homosocial relations.

On the whole, *The Victorian Male Body* is an excellent book that offers fresh and original insights into the workings of masculinity in an era in which it was a crucial yet unexplored axis of society. The book leaves the reader with the realisation that many contemporary notions of the masculine white body find antecedents in the Victorian era. It is striking to be reminded that many Victorian ideas of invisible but powerful white masculinity are still being challenged in today's society. The book's argument that the inconspicuousness of the white, male body allowed it to be the invisible "normal" against which all other notions of masculinity (as well as of femininity) must be measured and found wanting is a significant contribution to our understanding of gender in the Victorian period.