Introduction

This work is a study of masculinities, more specifically of the varied masculinities, masculine poetics, and constructions of artistic manhood that emerged in the early Victorian period, as well as an examination of the inscription of these diverse formations of the masculine in the high literature and visual art of this time. I have limited this study to the period extending from the early 1830s through the later 1860s, a relatively unexamined moment in the history of masculinities whose beginning is marked by the drive to construct a new form of manhood and a new masculine poetic for the industrial age, an enterprise exemplified in Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus (1833–34) and his Past and Present (1843), and whose dissolution is seen in the emergence of a gay or homosexual discourse, represented here by such early critical essays of Walter Pater as “Poems by William Morris” (1868), that destabilize early Victorian formations of manhood and of the masculine in literature and in art. Keeping within this period, the study concentrates on representative figures – Carlyle, Robert Browning, the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, Pater – as a way of exploring problematics within the construction of Victorian masculinities as well as within the efforts of Victorian men to fashion manly poetics and new styles of artistic manhood for their time.

OF MONKS AND MASCULINITIES

Readers who finish this study might well say, in Carlyle’s words of the 1840s, “We have heard so much of Monks; everywhere, in real and fictitious History” (Past 48). The figures in “real” Victorian history include the Tractarians who established celibate male religious communities in the 1840s, the female celibates of the new Puseyite sisterhoods of the same decade, the secular Brotherhood of the Pre-Raphaelites, and William Morris, who for the early Pater appeared
to manifest in contemporary life the medieval “mood of the cloister” (“Morris” 144). And since for the Victorians the line between “real and fictitious History” was notably blurred, we can also include Abbot Samson and the monks of St. Edmundsbury, the speaker of the “Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister” as well as Pictor Ignitus and Fra Lippo Lippi, and Pater’s imagined monk who “escapes from the sombre legend of his cloister to that true light” (“Morris” 147). To these must be added the cloistered females who in varied ways serve as surrogates for the celibate male – the nun of Charles Collins’ Convent Thoughts, the nun-like Mariana of Tennyson and Millais.

For early Victorian writers and artists facing the need to refashion the notion of manliness and of artistic manhood in a world transformed by industrialization and by embourgeoisement, the figures of the monk and of monasticism, energized by contemporary fears about the revival of celibate religious communities, provided a rich, malleable, and available metaphorics through which to register male anxieties. This discourse of monasticism, then, became the code through which the early Victorians debated what might be called, following Carlyle, the “Condition of Manliness question.” Without a psychological vocabulary, debate about practices of the male self was conducted through the historicist formulation and reformulation, the valuing and revaluing of the monk as celibate male. Concerns about relationships among men in the present were posed as historical accounts of these all-male religious communities of the past.

The intensity with which male writers and artists fixed on the monk and monasticism – Carlyle’s often embarrassing obeisance to Abbot Samson, Browning’s nostalgic heroicizing of Lippo, Kingsley’s hysterical reactions to Tractarian religious communities, the young Pre-Raphaelites’ zeal to establish a secular Brotherhood devoted to art, Pater’s account of Morris as modern-day monk – the disproportionate emotional energy expended on an anachronistic or, in its contemporary manifestation, a socially marginal topic provides insight into the male anxieties of this time. In Foucauldian terms, that debate centered on the all-male world of the monastery and the monk as celibate male enables us to identify points of problematization in the early Victorian formation of a male identity. And the variousness and incompatibility of these representations, the protean quality of the monk and of the monastery within this monastic discourse shows early Victorian masculinity not as a consensual or unitary formation, but rather as fluid and shifting, a set of
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contradictions and anxieties so irreconcilable within male life in the present as to be harmonized only through fictive projections into the past, the future, or even the afterlife.

For the Victorians, then, the monk and the monastery provided particularly labile and particularly suitable figures for the problematics and the contradictory possibilities of manhood in these decades.

As celibate male, the monk becomes the extreme or limit case of the central problematic in the Victorian practice of masculinity, the proper regulation of an innate male energy. At the center of the early Victorian occupation with the technology of the self as the management of energy, particularly of sexualized desire, lies a crucial problematic. While psychic discipline defines what the Victorians term manliness, if such discipline becomes too rigorous the extreme constraint of male desire will distort the male psyche and deform the very energy that powers and empowers men. Setting the intensity of discipline, then, becomes the crucial issue within the practice of the self. The formations of Victorian manhood may be set along a continuum of degrees of self-regulation, and along this continuum the monk, the celibate male safely displaced into the past, becomes the test or limit case. In exemplifying the extreme position in the Victorian practice of manliness as reserve, the monk becomes the figure through whom Victorian men in a mode of historicized psychology could argue their widely varied views about self-discipline, the management of male sexuality, and the function of repression. Thus we see great variations in the Victorian valuing of monkish celibacy, encompassing Carlyle’s heroicizing of sexual abstinence as the desexualization of desire, Browning’s representation of the psychic distortions generated by sexual repression in the cloister as the historicist analogue for the contemporary deformation of male creative potency through puritanical repression, the Pre-Raphaelite fixation upon the sexual longings of immured women, and Pater’s vision of the medieval cloister as prefiguring the practice of intensifying homoerotic desire through internalization. A rich Victorian history of male sexuality, these historicist codings of the monk center on monasticism not as a devotional, but as a psychosexual practice.

Not only as celibate male, but as celibate male artist, and more specifically as celibate male painter, the monk provides the limit case for another crucial problematic of early Victorian artistic manhood, the relation of sexual to artistic potency. The monastic artist becomes
the variously valued exemplar in the debate about finding the most efficient technology for turning male energy, more particularly sexualized male energy, to the production of art. From Carlyle through Pater the practice of masculine art is consistently theorized as being grounded in the regulation of male sexual energy and its history written as change within the practice of sexual self-discipline. There even develops in the 1840s and 1850s a psycho-sexual theory of mimesis that argues for the dependence of representational accuracy on the proper management of male sexuality and whose touchstone is medieval monastic painting. Within the assumption that the creative prowess of men depends upon the appropriate regulation of their sexuality, the views about the relation of artistic to sexual potency as coded within monastic discourse vary widely. For Carlyle the heroism of sublimation exemplified by Abbot Samson in the twelfth century is to be emulated by the heroic Man of Letters in the nineteenth. For the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers such Carlylean sublimation provides a model, albeit ambivalently practiced, for contemporary artists. Browning’s artist-monks, Pictor Ignotus and Fra Lippo Lippi, exemplify as extreme cases the necessity of fleshly sexual life to artistic achievement. And to Pater the erotics of repression in the monastery provides a typological figure for a refashioned discipline of the “aesthetic” in the present. Even the oft-repeated narrative of the monk escaping the cloister that encodes the relation of artistic to sexual liberation takes on varied signification, from Browning’s ambivalence to Pater’s later subversion of the received liberationist narrative.

In living a celibate life within an enclosed all-male society, the monk provides an equally resonant and diversely valued figure for yet another problematic of normative bourgeois masculinity, the uneasy relation between the male sphere and the domestic sphere, the opposition of bonds within the all-male world of work to the heterosexual ties of marriage. Bourgeois industrial manhood defines manliness as success within the male sphere, the new arena of commerce and technology in which sexual energy is transmuted into constructive labor. And for this wholly male zone of energy made productive by being desexualized, for this homosocial sphere cemented by chaste affective bonds between men, the monastery provides an historicist coding. And yet, if normative bourgeois manliness is defined as success within the world of work inhabited solely by other men, bourgeois masculinity is also defined in relation to the domestic
sphere within criteria that value the role of breadwinner for a
domestic establishment and that situate affectionate as well as sexual
life within marriage. In short, normative bourgeois masculinity
enforces compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory matrimony.

It is this tension in bourgeois masculinity between the homosocial
and the heterosexual that energizes the Victorian idealization of
monasticism. For those middle-class male writers dissatisfied with the
demands of this hegemonic valorization of domesticity, marriage,
and even heterosexuality, the monastery as a sacralized, celibate all-

male society safely distanced in time provides a figure through which
they could express in covert form, or as an open secret, their
attraction to a world of chaste masculine bonding from which the
female has been magically eliminated, an attraction that clearly
resonated with the longings of their middle-class male readers. For
some writers, notably Carlyle, the all-male society of the cloister
becomes intensely attractive as the safely distanced locus, as in early
Victorian manly tales of shipboard life or imperialist quest, of a life of
productive work from which the demands of marriage and even of
heterosexuality have been eliminated, the utopian site that Herman
Melville in idealizing the Inns of Court calls “The Paradise of
Bachelors.” And even in writers who present the all-male world of
the monastery not as a utopia, but as a prison, notably Browning and
the Pre-Raphaelites, we see a deep if often covert apprehension about
a life lived outside a self-engendering male community, a barely
concealed apprehension about bourgeois marriage sapping male
energy and domesticity vitiating male creative potency.

Furthermore, as the early Victorian signifier for affective life
between men, the monastery becomes an imaginative zone in which
male writers negotiate the troubled boundary between the homo-
social and the homosexual. Again, the widely disparate representa-
tions of historical monasticism, drawing upon anxieties about the
contemporary emergence of both male and female celibate religious
communities, indicate both the intensity of homophobic feeling in the
1840s and 1850s as well as the varied practices for engaging the
tension about male–male desire built into normative bourgeois
masculinity. If to Carlyle and his many male readers in the early
1840s the monastery presented an ideal world of brotherhood as
chaste male affection, to the critics of the Pre-Raphaelites at the end
of the decade even a Brotherhood of male artists appeared to move
beyond the bounds of the homosocial into the dangerous zone of
feminization and even effeminacy. This troubled, edgy response in the late 1840s to communal masculine bonding, seen also in Kingsley’s attack on contemporary religious communities of celibate men, marks the moment at which such bonds become problematized, the point at which monastic discourse comes to express the tension between the homosocial and the homophobic that becomes the central problematic in the formation of artistic manhood in the later Victorian period.

If the monastic life provided the limit case for affective life among men, it also provided the extreme case, valued along an equally wide range, for the relation of the male artist and poet to the economic basis of his practice, a problematic most frequently coded within monastic discourse as historiist retellings of the encounter of the poet/artist as monk with an emerging capitalism. In keeping with the ambivalence of early Victorian male artists to the art market, within these economic narratives the artist-monk and the monastery bear two wholly contradictory significations. In the Carlylean narrative, as a community organized not by seasonal rhythms, but by the mechanized scheduling of the clock, the medieval monastery becomes a proto-factory prefiguring the historically inevitable coming of the factory system and the monk anticipates the factory worker sublimating his sexual energy into productive work. Within this narrative of monasticism, the artist as modern-day monk, the Hero as Man of Letters or the Pre-Raphaelite Brother, attains artistic manhood as a worker channeling desexualized desire into art production.

In the other, more widespread narrative the monastic artist represents in pure and unrealizable form the dream of the male artist existing outside the art market. As pre-capitalist art-workers, such artist-monks figure the irreconcilable contradictions of early Victorian artistic manhood, the intense ambivalence of the male poet and artist toward the commercial pressure of the male sphere. Artistic practice fantasized as existing beyond the demands of the market retains a purity from the commodification of male energy, yet in its distancing from the locus of aggressive competitive masculinity in the male sphere this isolated life is also figured as impotent, unmanly. Browning’s Unknown Painter, the prototype of a gallery of isolated, imprisoned monks, such as those of the Grande Chartreuse, is an emasculated man. The artist-monk thus figures the paradox of artistic manhood – the domain of literature and art must be reserved
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for men, yet in being situated outside the male sphere, such activity unmans the male writer and artist. And yet, the monk and the celibate male society of the monastery also come to represent early Victorian ways of resolving this paradox, becoming figures for a masculine poetic situated within a community of men and grounded in the values and the activities of normative bourgeois masculinity.

**VICTORIAN MASCULINITIES**

Several years ago, I went to Wordsworth, a state-of-the-art academic bookstore in Harvard Square, to buy a copy of Ehrenreich’s *The Hearts of Men*, a wonderful account of the relocation of manliness from suburban split-level to *Playboy* pad in 1950s America. Unsure of where such a book would be shelved, I asked the clerk, whose computer told us that it was to be found in Women’s Studies. When I suggested that it might be less than appropriate to set a book about men in a section devoted to women, I was told, “That’s the way we do it.”

That might have been the way Wordsworth did it only a few years ago, but when I went back recently to buy Leverenz’s *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, a fine study of the conflicted self-fashionings of manhood in such nineteenth-century American figures as Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, and Hawthorne, I found that Wordsworth had added between Women’s Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies three shelves devoted to what was now called “Men’s Issues,” a section containing not only Bly’s *Iron John*, but also Leverenz’ study as well as Ehrenreich’s *The Hearts of Men*.

This anecdote of reshelving illustrates, in brief, the history, the current condition, and the problematic of the project that may be called the study of masculinities. Shelving scholarly works about men to follow scholarly works in Women’s Studies suggests the theoretical source of such studies of masculinity in the feminist scholarship of our time, particularly in the awareness of gender as a social construction, multiform and historically specific. That studies of masculinity now have shelves of their own suggests that examination of the social construction of the masculine now constitutes a demarcated field of study, while the position between Women’s Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies indicates the inextricable connection of such inquiry with the study of other formations of gender and sexuality. And that these studies of masculinity in history take up only three shelves, as
opposed to many times that number for books about women and about gay and lesbian life indicates the relatively small scale of this project at the present moment. Finally, that in these few shelves devoted to Men’s Issues the psychoanalytic writing of Leverenz and the politically astute high popularization of Ehrenreich rub book jackets with the cult of Bly indicates the connection of highly theorized and historicized study of the formations of masculinity to the “Issues” or tensions in the lives of Wordsworth’s customers.

Rather than “Men’s Issues,” I would employ for this field and for the methodology of this book the term the “study of masculinities,” a name that foregrounds the major concerns of this volume. “Masculinities,” in distinction to Men’s Studies, emphasizes not the biological determinants but the social construction of what at any historical moment is marked as “masculine.” The plural, “masculinities,” stresses the multiple possibilities of such social formations, the variability in the gendering of the biological male, and the range of such constructions over time and within any specific historical moment, and especially within the early Victorian period.

This emphasis on the multiplicity, the plurality of male gender formations is crucial not only to counter the still pervasive essentialist view of maleness, but also to deconstruct the monolithic view of masculinity, the unitary vision of the “masculine” that, with seeming disregard to the success of feminism in exploding such essentialist and monolithic thinking about women, still pervades and even structures discussion of men, particularly of men in the nineteenth century. Only a sense of the plurality of formations of the masculine among the Victorians can productively open the discussion of manhood in the nineteenth century to the issue of competition among multiple possibilities of masculinity, to the instability in the configuration of male identity shaped from among these competing formations by specific individuals and specific groups of men, and to the ways in which such tensions are inscribed in the literature and the art of the time.

Yet any study of masculinities and particularly of Victorian masculinities faces several crucial issues that must be confronted at the outset. One of the chief difficulties lies, quite simply, in the question of power. If Women’s Studies as well as Gay and Lesbian Studies derive their energy and purpose from engaging a history of oppression and thereby liberating the self from that oppression, a study of masculinities examines the history of the oppressors, of the hegemonic discourse, of the patriarchy. This justifiable anxiety about
The study of the masculine must be acknowledged, and may be addressed in several ways. For one, the emphasis on the constructed rather than the innate, and on the multiple rather than the unitary view of the masculine calls attention to the historical contingency of such formations of manliness and of male power itself, thus questioning male dominance and supporting the possibility of altering the configuration of what is marked as masculine. Furthermore, for the writer on Victorian masculinities the problem of power and patriarchy calls for a double awareness, a sensitivity both to the ways in which these social formations of the masculine created conflict, anxiety, tension in men while acknowledging that, in spite of the stress, men accepted these formations as a form of self-policing crucial to patriarchal domination. As Munich notes at the beginning of her fine study *Andromeda’s Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Art and Literature*, “Men used the Andromeda myth not only to celebrate the rewards of a patriarchal system, but also to record their discomforts with it” (2).

A second major issue for the study of masculinities in the nineteenth century lies in the relation of this enterprise to the field of gender study currently so productive within Victorian studies – Gay Studies. Like any student of Victorian masculinities I am indebted to the work done within the project of Gay Studies. My inquiry has been invigorated by the model, associated with the work of Sedgwick, describing male–male relationships along a continuum of male desire (*Between Men* Introduction), a model that I employ throughout this study. Sedgwick’s work has enabled Victorianists to see conflict between male–male desire and its social interdiction as an important reason for the instability of male identity in Victorian male writers, an issue defended against by the Victorian writers themselves, by their contemporary readers and by the modern male (?) critical tradition. Indeed, one of the dismaying pleasures of reading Sedgwick on *The Princess* or critics such as Craft (“Descend”) and Sinfield on the Tennyson/Hallam relation is realizing how much I, like other Victorianists, have resisted seeing the intensity of male–male desire in this poet. Similarly, to see homophobic tensions in Dickens’ novels (Sedgwick *Between Men* chs. 9, 10) or in Stoker’s *Dracula* (Craft “Kiss Me”) is to see the fault lines within what had traditionally been seen as a monolithic Victorian male consciousness.

Yet here, as with the issue of power, a doubleness of vision is needed, a negotiation that acknowledges male–male desire as crucial
to the construction of and the problematics of male identity in the nineteenth century, but does not see such desire as the single or necessarily primary constitutive force in the formation of and conflicts within Victorian masculinities. Rather, my own study of the social construction of Victorian manliness considers the homoerotic as one among the many psychological and social forces that troubled Victorian manhood, among them industrialization, the development of bourgeois hegemony, class conflict, the feminization of culture.

Furthermore, if students of Victorian masculinities must be attentive to conflict between male–male desire and the normative formation of the masculine as one important cause, among many, for the instability of manhood in writers and artists, Sedgwick’s description of male–male relationships as a continuum rather than a simple binary of straight/gay suggests that important work is to be done at the troubled boundaries between the developing gay discourse and hegemonic forms of masculinity. In the concluding chapter of this study I focus on a crucial moment of this intersection, the early critical writing of Pater, in order to examine this complex process of appropriation, transformation and even acceptance of normative formations of heterosexual masculinity within the emergent gay discourse.6

Like most recent work on Victorian masculinities, this study is grounded in the work of Foucault, most specifically in The History of Sexuality. Indeed, writing the history of Victorian masculinities along the lines of a Foucauldian history of sexuality is particularly pertinent since Victorian men themselves wrote the history of literature and of art as the history of techniques of managing male desire. If, following Foucault, we look to the history of masculinities as “a history of ethical problematizations” (π: 13), then for the early Victorians the problematization of sexuality and of manliness are conjoined. To state briefly here what will be developed at length in this study, the early Victorians defined maleness as the possession of an innate, distinctively male energy that, in contrast to Freud, they did not represent as necessarily sexualized, but as an inchoate force that could be expressed in a variety of ways, only one of which is sexual.7 This interior energy was consistently imagined or fantasized in a metaphors of fluid, suggestively seminal, and in an imagery of flame. The point of problematization for manhood or what the Victorian middle-class termed “manliness” was situated in developing what Foucault calls “practices of the self” (π: 13) for properly