

GENDERING MEN :
THEORIZING MASCULINITIES IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND
LITERATURE

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CONCLUSIONS

Masculinity, as the present study has tried to show, is a plural, complex, and often contradictory gender construct. Therefore, drawing final conclusions on men and masculinities might be intrinsically opposed to the nature of masculinity itself. As Catharine Stimpson has noted, “the more anthropologists, sociologists, and historians explore the meanings of being ‘a man,’ the more inconsistent, contradictory, and varied they become” (Foreword xi). While acknowledging, then, the intrinsic difficulty of writing any final or definitive conclusions on men and masculinities, it seems both possible and desirable to draw a number of *provisional* concluding remarks that will, hopefully, provide some suggestions for future research in the field of masculinity studies.

The present study has attempted to demonstrate the thesis that (white heterosexual) men, like women, are also gendered beings; that they have, therefore, undergone specific social, cultural, and historical gendering processes; and that, in contemporary American culture, such gendering processes play a key role in men’s lives as well as their literary representations. By analyzing the construction and representation of white

heterosexual masculinities in contemporary American culture and literature, the present study has, ultimately, tried to question and rethink the cultural meanings on which dominant or hegemonic masculinity has traditionally been built. Approaching (American white heterosexual) masculinity as a specific socio-historical and political construction, rather than a universal and immutable inner essence, the present study has, in effect, attempted to demonstrate that what was socially and culturally constructed can also be socially and culturally de-constructed. These main theses have been developed and expanded throughout a general introduction and five different chapters.

In the introduction, it has been argued that the concept of gender is usually associated with women, not men, and that, rather than gendered, men have been repeatedly de-gendered and universalized. The association of masculinity with universality has had a particularly detrimental effect on women, whose specific experiences have long been silenced by an eminently androcentric society. Nevertheless, the universalizing conception of masculinity has also had a negative impact on the analysis of men and masculinities, since such a conception excludes from consideration what is unique to men *qua* men. Hence the emergence of masculinity studies, which

analyzes men *as* men, that is, men as gendered beings. So, masculinity studies transforms supposedly universal experiences into ones that are distinctly masculine, analyzing masculinity as socially constructed, context-specific, and culture-bound. In analyzing gender as a social construct, rather than a natural and immutable inner essence, masculinity studies thus shows how gender can change.

After describing masculinity studies and its main aims, then, chapter 1 has gone on to analyze the origins of this field of study, which have been traced back to two main American social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s: the feminist movement and the gay movement, both of which were inspired by the liberating ideas of the Civil Rights movement. While feminism questioned the traditional gender binary, the gay struggle challenged normative conceptions of heterosexuality. Together, then, these two movements began to question and redefine American heterosexual masculinity. Academically, studies of masculinities in the United States derive mainly from the pioneering work of women's studies, which created the vocabulary for discussions of gender inequality and gender constructs, and gay studies, which has long been questioning sexual and gendered binaries. Though informed by these two major fields of study, masculinity

studies, as has been seen, constitutes, by comparison with feminist and gay studies, a recent addition to the American academia. However, its influence seems to be growing, as has been seen from the fact that many former women's studies departments in the United States are being re-named gender studies departments to be able to incorporate both gay and masculinity studies into their curricula. As Carolyn Dinshaw has argued, "it will be a mark of success if it is understood by everybody that gender studies includes the study of masculinity" (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*).

Chapter 1 has also analyzed the development of studies of masculinities in the United States, which seem to have gone through two main waves. The first, running from the mid-1970s to the 1980s, explored both the privileges and the costs of being a man in American society, although tended to focus on a monolithic (white heterosexual) conception of masculinity. The second, beginning in the 1990s and informed by both lesbian and black feminisms, has been increasingly acknowledging the (sexual and ethnic) plurality of American masculinities. The first chapter has explored as well the political principles of masculinity studies, which are generally based on feminist ideology. While not all masculinity studies can be considered feminist, much contemporary American masculinity

scholarship, as has been shown, does indeed seem to rely on the ideological premises of (second-wave) feminism. Although men's involvement in feminism has been subject to much controversy and debate, the present study has also been trying to demonstrate that it is both possible and convenient for a man to adopt a feminist perspective on masculinity studies. On the one hand, there exists a long history of anti-sexist men in America.²⁰⁶ On the other, many feminist women, moving beyond separatist tendencies, are increasingly acknowledging and welcoming men's participation in the feminist struggle for gender equality. Chapter 1 has thus concluded that both men and women can, and should, use feminist approaches to studying men and masculinities. Looking at the "new directions" of masculinity studies in the United States, chapter 1 has, finally, pointed to one of the (apparently) major contradictions of contemporary research on men and masculinities. As has been suggested, many contemporary studies of masculinities in the United States seem to be placing a growing emphasis on how masculinity is inflected by race and ethnicity, sexuality, social class, age, nationality, etc. Thus, increasing attention is being paid, for example, to gay and ethnic men and masculinities. Nevertheless, since the 1980s poststructuralist theories

²⁰⁶ Kimmel and Mosmiller, for example, have explored this history at length and in depth.

have been warning against the danger of any identity construction. Questioning stable notions of ethnic, sexual, and national identities, these theories have thus offered a radical critique of identity as coherent and fixed. As has been seen, the ongoing debate between poststructuralist and identity-based approaches to gender and sexuality seems to be relevant to this study as well. After all, the subject of this thesis is (white heterosexual) masculine identity. However, poststructuralist thinkers like Alan Petersen have set out to question the internal consistency, as well as the very existence, of identity concepts such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity/maleness.

Given this apparent contradiction, then, chapter 2 has begun by analyzing the repercussions of poststructuralist thought on the analysis of (American) white heterosexual masculinity, the focus of this study. While poststructuralist theories have shown (American) white heterosexual masculinity to be a changing, unstable, and often contradictory socio-historical construct, much feminist scholarship has stressed that poststructuralism tends to neglect issues of power and gender inequality. Feminist scholar Lynne Segal (*Slow*), for example, has argued that much poststructuralist work on men and masculinities emphasizes the very instability, precariousness, and internal inconsistencies of masculinity, while

neglecting its political and often oppressive aspects. Nevertheless, I have tried to demonstrate how it is possible to reconcile feminist politics with the analysis of (American white heterosexual) masculinity's internal contradictions. As Judith Butler has argued, "the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (*Gender* 148). To claim a poststructuralist approach to subjectivity and identity is not to place politics in the context of disintegration. Equally important, it is not to pit politics against poststructuralist thinking. Rather, it is to think of the two fields in a dialectic tension (Eng and Hom Introduction 17). Moreover, I have tried to illustrate the new political possibilities that this knowledge opens up for masculinity studies, since a full understanding of the fragmented male subject allows us to question the exclusionary and discriminatory aspects of our own identitarian and/or gendered claims. After all, a monolithic vision of masculine identity tends to neglect, for example, the existing social, ethnic, and sexual differences *among* men. Moreover, it reinforces the view of masculinity as natural, coherent, eternal, and immutable. In this way, masculinity can go unanalyzed and, therefore, unchallenged. Following Butler (*Bodies* 227), then, I have concluded how it is no longer clear that

feminist theory should rely on notions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. Instead, we should wonder about the new political possibilities that might emerge from a radical critique of the (American white heterosexual male) subject.

While Part I has thus established the general theoretical background of this study, Part II has focused on analyzing the influence of masculinity on two main themes: emotions and violence. In order to illustrate this influence, the study has applied an (eminently American) interdisciplinary corpus of masculinity studies -formed by sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, history, literature and literary theory, among other disciplines- to the analysis of each of these two (apparently genderless) issues within the American cultural context. Informed by some of the latest contributions to masculinity studies from different disciplines, this part has thus tried to demonstrate the relevance of masculinity and masculinity studies to the analysis of two fundamental social and political themes in (contemporary) U.S. society.

Using an interdisciplinary methodology, then, the first chapter in Part II has set out to explore the relationship between masculinity and emotions in American culture. Although sentimentality and the display of emotions

have been usually considered feminine, chapter 3 has tried to demonstrate how the exclusive equation of emotions with femininity is a cultural and historical construction. As has been argued, this has two main implications. First, masculinity and emotions have not always been mutually exclusive. Second, what has been socially and historically shaped can also be socially re-shaped. Thus, attention has been paid to the links between masculinity and emotion in American culture in order to analyze the political potential of profeminist men's emotions to transform masculinities and gender relations. It is true that some men's studies and groups have focused almost exclusively on helping men explore and express their emotional inner selves, thus ignoring other socio-political aspects of masculinity. No wonder, then, that much masculinity scholarship has defined emotions as intrinsically opposed to social change in masculinities and gender relations. Drawing on some of the latest American studies on masculinities and emotions, however, this chapter has attempted to challenge this binarism, defining emotion not *against* thought but *as* thought, not as *preceding* the social but *as* social. In so doing, it has defended the political potential of profeminist men's emotions as part of the feminist struggle for social and gender equality in the United States. Like feminist women, whose

reassessment of female experience and feelings has helped challenge patriarchy, profeminist men are beginning to use their emotions not only to explore their “feminine” side but also, and more importantly, to contribute to promoting gender equality. As chapter 3 has been trying to demonstrate, emotions need not be limited to individual, local, and/or therapeutic contexts. They can also become highly social and political. Thus, the individual/inner and social/political components of emotions might, and should, be reconciled. Like feminist women, anti-sexist men can also get emotional about gender inequality, if they want, as their numerous campaigns against domestic violence, for example, are showing. In emphasizing men’s (emotional) involvement in feminism, then, chapter 3 has also worked to illustrate the main thesis put forward in chapter 2—namely, that (white heterosexual) masculinity is far from static or monolithic. The fact that some (white heterosexual) men are actively and emotionally involved in feminism does indeed seem to question the unproblematized equation of masculinity with patriarchy.

Given the increasing relevance of literature to American masculinity scholarship, the last two chapters of this thesis have also incorporated literature and literary theory into the analysis of American men and

masculinities. Offering an eminently theoretical introduction to studies of (American) literary masculinities, chapter 4 has tried to demonstrate how literature and literary theory have always been centrally concerned with exploring and (re-)presenting the (gendered) issues and conflicts of culture and society. The close links between culture and literature also become apparent in the field of masculinity and gender studies. As this study has tried to illustrate, “gender is (a) representation” and “the representation of gender *is* its construction” (De Lauretis 3). It follows, therefore, that studies of cultural and literary representations of masculinity are particularly relevant to the analysis of the social and political constructions of masculinity.

Unlike the study of literary representations of women, however, which has already become a fundamental part of the academic curriculum in the United States, the analysis of literary representations of masculinity remains largely unpracticed and unknown. Nevertheless, the study of fictional masculinities constitutes a rapidly growing field of research which counts, as has been shown, an increasing number of publications. A men’s studies approach to American literature might, as has been argued, prove beneficial for several reasons. For example, just as the (mis)conception that

male experience equals human experience affected literary criticism's treatment of women as characters and authors, so it has restricted our approaches to men in literature. Traditionally, literary criticism by males has approached the dilemmas of male characters in abstract, philosophical, and universal terms. However, a men's studies approach to American literature moves the focus of criticism from the manner in which men's lives reflect universal dilemmas to a more intimate, personal concern with how cultural values, particularly those related to manhood ideals, affect men's lives on a personal level (Riemer 293-5). Rereading supposedly universal, genderless issues such as emotions or violence from a men's studies perspective thus helps illustrate how masculinity ideals affect, and often restrict and complicate, men's lives. Moreover, a men's studies rereading of American literature not only questions patriarchal notions of masculinities, but is also centrally concerned with analyzing new, alternative, non-oppressive patterns of manhood, as chapter 5 has also tried to illustrate and exemplify. In conclusion, then, the present study has been trying to demonstrate how the aim of a men's studies approach to American literature is "Re-vision," which Adrienne Rich described as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (90-1).

Ideologically, our rereading of American fictional masculinities has been grounded in feminist literary criticism. Just as masculinity studies is generally based on feminist theory, studies of literary masculinities are often inspired by feminist literary criticism. As has been argued, feminist studies of literary masculinities, like feminist analyses of men and masculinities in general, can be practiced by both women and men, even if male and female feminist practices are not -and should not always be- identical. Like the sex of the critic, the sex of the author remains an equally important aspect of textual criticism. As has been shown, knowledge about the sex of the writer, despite some theories about the “death of the author,” continues to be relevant to literary criticism. While this thesis has read (white) male authors as representing a particularized, rather than universal, gender (and racialized) viewpoint, I have also tried to illustrate the plurality as well as the complexity of (white) male fiction. Since (American white heterosexual) male identity is plural, complex, and often contradictory, as chapter 2 has tried to demonstrate, (American white heterosexual) male fiction, as has been argued in chapter 4, can also produce both traditional and subversive depictions of masculinities and gender relations.

Most of these fundamentally theoretical arguments about (literary) men and masculinities have been developed and exemplified in chapter 5, which has incorporated literature and literary theory into the discussion of the links between masculinity and violence in American culture. Though eminently interdisciplinary, chapter 5 has tried to emphasize the role American literature plays in the social construction of American masculinities. As this study has tried to prove, the relationship between studies of literary masculinities and the larger field of masculinity studies might be a reciprocal one. Analyzing literary representations of masculinity helps understand the larger social workings of masculinity, just as sociological and behavioral studies of masculinities become absolutely essential for a full understanding of the representations of manhood in American literature. In American culture, as has been argued, social and literary concepts of masculinity might be mutually informative. By applying masculinity studies to the analysis of literary representations of masculinity, then, I have tried to undermine the classical distinctions between different disciplines (such as sociology and psychology, on the one hand, and cultural and literary studies, on the other) and critical theories (such as masculinity

studies and literary criticism), as well as the boundaries between politics and literature, the “literary” and the “non-literary,” the social world and the text.

Crossing the divide between “reality” and “fiction,” then, chapter 5 has tried to deepen into the links between masculinity and violence in both American culture and literature. Even though male violence constitutes a major social problem of most contemporary societies worldwide, the close relationship between masculinity and violence has often been naturalized and so remains, paradoxically enough, largely unexplored. Borrowing from the latest work on male violence carried out by several American masculinity scholars, this chapter has thus tried to explore the recurrent association between masculinity and violence, which seems to have resulted from different social and historical, rather than natural or essentialist, factors. While most psychoanalytic and anthropological explanations for male violence describe it as inevitable and universal, such views may be challenged by the very existence of a number of pacifist cultures where men, as has been argued, are extremely gentle and nonviolent. To complement the psychoanalytic and anthropological theoretical explanations for the relationship between masculinity and violence, the chapter has focused on sociological and historical explanations as well. While the connection

between masculinity and violence seems to be deeply ingrained in the cultural and literary history of the U.S., chapter 5 has shown and tried to emphasize that what was socially and historically constructed can also be culturally de-constructed, and that American literature can play a crucial role in this de-construction.

With the main aim of offering examples of contemporary American authors and literary texts that question and re-think the classical association between violence and virility, then, this study has selected Russell Banks's *Affliction* (1989) and Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* (1987) and *A Multitude of Sins* (2001). Rather than as a reaffirmation of masculinity, Banks and Ford do indeed seem to re-present violence, which in their works is shown to (usually) result from economic hardship, as a (self-)destructive force for both women and men. While women writers have long denounced the effects of patriarchal violence on women's lives, Banks and Ford have been selected for their innovative re-visions of male violence as an alienating influence on women and men alike. In underlining the disastrous effects of violence on both genders, then, the fictional works of writers like Russell Banks and Richard Ford seem to offer both hope and inspiration for a radical critique of the traditional view of violence as a proof of American

masculinity and virility. Furthermore, many of Ford's short stories depict, as we have seen, boys and men who reject violence, separating from their violent fathers or aggressive (male) friends. Thus, Ford's fiction has been given special attention, as he not only challenges and demythologizes traditional conceptions of male violence, but also seems to provide innovative depictions of alternative, relational, non-violent patterns of manhood in American culture and literature.

While chapter 5 has thus focused on literary re-visions of the traditional conception of violence as a symbol of masculinity, such innovative re-writings have been preceded by, and contrasted with, more traditional depictions of male violence in American literature, as exemplified by Ernest Hemingway and Chuck Palahniuk. Even though Hemingway's vision of violence as a test of manhood has been shown to pervade much of his fiction about boxing, bullfighting, war, etc., chapter 5 has used "An African Story" (1972) to illustrate his specific conception of hunting as a test of manhood, which has been recurrently questioned, as has been shown, in Richard Ford's stories. "An African Story" has thus been used not only as an example for Hemingway's recurrent (fictional) association between masculinity and violence, but also, and especially, as a

contrast to Ford's contemporary subversion of the Hemingwayesque view of hunting as a symbol of virility and heroism. While contemporary American writers like Richard Ford have thus tried to challenge the traditional conception of violence as a proof of masculinity, the image keeps playing a key role, as has been shown, in contemporary American culture and literature. Despite its emphasis on contemporary literary re-visions of masculinity and violence, then, chapter 5 has also analyzed Chuck Palahniuk's best-selling novel *Fight Club* (1996) to try to illustrate the continued use of violence as an expression of manhood in contemporary American fiction. Ultimately, then, Palahniuk's novel, along with Ernest Hemingway's "An African Story," have provided a contrast to Richard Ford and Russell Banks's more innovative re-visions of male violence.

Clearly, the present work does not attempt (were it possible) to provide an exhaustive or conclusive analysis of American men and masculinities. For one thing, the study has concentrated on two themes - namely, emotions and violence. In the same way, the selected corpus of writers and literary texts is simply an example of the possibilities offered by the growing field of study of literary masculinities. In any event, this work, as has been suggested, attempts to mainly generate discussion, and raise

some new questions, on American (fictional) masculinities. Such questions should, hopefully, encourage other scholars to carry out further research in the field of masculinity studies, in general, and studies of literary masculinities, in particular. For, if the construction of gender is, as this study has tried to show, mainly representational, then it follows that literature and the worlds of representation might actually play a fundamental role in the (de-)construction of American masculinities. Clearly, literature cannot, and should not, be expected to change the world and solve all its (gendered) conflicts, since fiction, as Nobel-Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison has argued, “is not a case study, it is not a recipe.” However, the world of literature, as Morrison herself elaborates, usually has “something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are” (Evans 341). Following Morrison’s seminal definition, then, it might not be too fanciful to conclude by suggesting, once again, that analyzing American literary masculinities might enrich the study of American social concepts of masculinity, its dynamics, and its conflicts. Just as the research work on fictional men and masculinities often benefits from the analysis of social ideas about manhood, I believe that exploring literary depictions of

masculinity can also help understand its social construction. After all, a “real” man, as this study has tried to demonstrate, is nothing but a fiction.