

Introduction: Female Masculinity or Textual Masculinity

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Gilbert and Gubar's account homogenises all female creative utterances into *feminist* self-expression: a strategy which singularly fails to account for the ways in which women can come to take up a masculine subject position – that is to say, become solid defenders of the patriarchal *status quo*.

– Toril Moi 1986: 217

Much has happened in the almost twenty years that have passed since Moi wrote this. Masculinity studies has emerged as an academic field to be reckoned with, and in the process the facile equation between masculine and patriarchal that Moi makes has not been left unproblematised. Yet, the core of Moi's statement remains acute: we need to consider the ways in which female artists and writers may, not only give voice to masculinity, but artistically or textually inhabit masculinity. Thus, her statement stands as a formidable example of both what we wish to heed and what we wish to problematise in this special issue.

It is a special issue that arose out of a larger project we had conceived on “male sexuality in the female mind” – or, more precisely, on the representation of male identity and sexuality in the works of Anglophone female writers since Aphra Behn. When we read through the vast body of proposals we received, we were intrigued by the phrase “textual masculinity,” which popped up in two independent proposals.¹

¹ The phrase was used in the most sustained fashion by Pia Livia Hekanaho, who has, published an article covering ground similar to the one proposed for this issue, where she delineates her concept of “textual female masculinity.” Hekanaho speaks of “textual female masculinity as a set of textual strategies” (2006: 7), and these are “the textual strategies that are construed as ‘masculine’ regardless of the author’s gender” (10). It is thus “a concept for dealing with the inevitably gendered aspects of any text” (10). As should be clear below, our concept of “textual masculinity” has a slightly different, or at least broader, definition. Even so, we wish to acknowledge one statement of Hekanaho’s that rings particularly true with our project: “The concept of textual masculinity

We started asking ourselves what broader considerations this phrase could give rise to if one thought through and along with it. For instance, what specifically textual ways are used to produce and reproduce forms of maleness, masculinity, male desire and male sexuality in female writing? The central objective of our project became to highlight and analyze how men – or male characters and narrators – are constructed and constituted at a textual level in the works of female writers through tropes, voice, performance and cultural discourses, rather than primarily through situation or through their relationships: What are the strategies for representing masculinity, male desire, sexuality, homoeroticism at a textual – as opposed to a situational – level? What makes masculine focalization different from feminine focalization? What are the assumptions that underlie these representations? What are the strategies that create them?

We asked a number of our contributors to reconsider their proposed statements with these questions in mind. Our guiding contention has been that whatever angle literature is studied from, the specificity of literature as a medium must be taken into account, that is, its textuality – and that this is perhaps especially important in the case of gender criticism. The result is a handful of articles that constitutes a tentative and highly selective exploration of what a consideration of “textual masculinity” might entail. The articles cover the spectrum from heteronormative masculinity to decidedly queer masculinity, sometimes within the same text – the study of textual masculinity thus highlights the “positionality” of gender, that is, how masculinity and femininity become points/locations between which one can move as a writer, if not freely, then perhaps knowingly. The articles consider aspects of textuality such as gaps and omissions, figurative language, tropes and genre conventions, as well as the interrelation between text and reader in the construction of gender identity. In the process, these articles also become an exploration of how “textual” and “textuality” may be understood in the first place.

makes visible the various interrelations between gender, textuality, and sexuality present in all textual activity” (10).

We see these articles as participating in the beginning of a mapping out of a new field of research – at least new in the sense that it has not been made conscious of itself and acquired a clear sense of its purpose, methods and underlying theories. This is particularly the case insofar as textual masculinity studies would entail the study of texts by female writers. Indeed, when one looks at texts on masculinity and masculinity studies, the object of study is almost always male; and if the object of study is masculinity in literature, the authors studied are almost always male.² This state of affairs clearly disrupts the view of masculinity as a socially constructed phenomenon – it undercuts, more than “somewhat,” the assertion that gender is not connected to sex. At the same time, while much research has been done within the perimeters of feminist and gender studies on male writers’, and their fictional characters’, notions of femininity and their views of female identity and sexuality, not much has been done, even with the growth of masculinity studies, on female writers’ notions of masculinity and their views of male identity and sexuality – how, one might wonder, do female writers not only write *about* men, but *write* men (and perhaps even write *as* men)?

This is by no means an incidental consideration at this point in literary history – in the last few decades, it has become more common for female writers to not only focus on male characters, but to seek to inhabit them. This has been especially common in female writers who write homosexual men and their relations: Annie Proulx, Louise Welsh, Diana Gabaldon and, to take an example from Francophone writing, Marguerite Yourcenar. Indeed, both Mark John Isola and Virginia Keft-Kennedy in this issue deal with the intersection of homosexuality and masculinity in the works of female writers.

It should be evident, then, that we do not understand “masculinity” here to be simply the domain of men. Instead, as a gender category, it has the potential to cross sexes. However, despite this, in this issue we are primarily using the term masculinity as an umbrella term to cover

² One recent exception is Jean Bobby Noble’s *Masculinities without Men?*, which traces representations of female masculinity in twentieth-century fictions, from Hall’s “lesbianist” classic, *The Well of Loneliness*, to Kimberley Peirce’s haunting transgender themed film, *Boys Don’t Cry*.

identifications and attitudes that both arise from and determine *men's* relation to the social world, to their bodies, to their sexuality and to their emotional lives. Rather than being interested in women writers who are somehow masculine, or who portray masculine women, we are primarily interested in women writers who portray *men* in such a way as to engage with the question of masculinity. Yet, a full consideration of textual masculinity would, of course, have to account for effects and positions of masculinity involving female characters, androgynous characters and characters that are indeterminable in terms of gender. The latter is uncommon, but is perhaps most famously present in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, which is discussed in the article by Anna Fåhraeus that concludes this issue.³

One important connection in our considerations here is Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998). Halberstam advocates a study of masculinity that does not necessarily focus on actual men. In fact, if we wish to find points at which masculinity transgresses its perceived boundaries, we should locate instances of masculinity that do not directly concern men. If we wish to understand masculinity fully we need to consider *female* masculinity. While Halberstam's study deals with actual masculine women, one can extrapolate from her arguments a corollary critical engagement with female writers' textual masculinity. However, there is a difference in this engagement: while it is, like Halberstam's, an engagement with a masculinity less explicitly tied to biological sex, it is not necessarily tied to common cultural markers of maleness, and is most certainly not tied to an immediate corporeality – or is at least tied to a different sort of corpus (the text).

In other words, wedded with a concern with how women may imagine and represent masculinity is a primary concern with how modes of masculinity are *textually produced* in the works of female writers. In a way, we are turning the issue of the gendering of texts inside-out: it is not primarily a question of locating the points at which a text is gendered, but rather of locating the points at which it *genders*. As should be clear, then, our concern with the textual is not a question of aloof aestheticism removed from quotidian experience. In fact, at the same

3 Notable forerunners here are Woolf's Orlando and Brigid Brophy's In Transit.

time as textual masculinity may be taken to mean a free-floating, disembodied masculinity in contradistinction to a material masculinity of the lived masculine body, it may also be taken to mean masculinity at its most fundamental level – at least if one concurs that the textual, the discursive, is where the ostensibly material is, too a large extent, produced; insofar as the material is always manifested through a particular intentionality (discursively directed if not discursively formed) that precedes any possible essence of the material. As Monique Wittig would have it, “[c]oncepts, categories, and abstractions [. . .] can effect a physical and material violence against the bodies they claim to organize and interpret” (Butler 116). As Wittig’s theory and practice show, literary discourse is both a site of the perpetuation of such violence, and the potential site of subversion of such violence. From Wittig, we get a broad concern with gender in language, as textually produced – and as textually overcome, if that is the goal. Accordingly, we may ask whether there is an identification or a disidentification with available discourses in a given text; how genre conventions, tropes, traditional narrative logic, etc., control the production of masculinity in the literary text; and how that production may come to push existing textual limits.

In other words, “textual masculinity” marks a concern with the roles that are played in the text by conformity in behavior and response to traditional social norms and the evocation of icons and stereotypes of masculinity, as well as with what the masculine norm is presented as within a text. Additionally, a focus on textual masculinity emphasises tropes and figures that are connected with the male characters and thus become intertwined with the text’s presentation of masculinity – a masculinity that may or may not be identified with a male character. The film *Boys Don’t Cry*, for instance, deals with how masculinity is constructed in Brandon/Teena’s character, and studies of masculinity within the film can thus consider how discourses and norms of masculinity are presented and re-presented, imagined and re-imagined –

textually, and how specific (“masculine” and “feminine”) discourses and ideologies cling to specific textual techniques and strategies.⁴

Above all, “textual masculinity” acknowledges that the primary function of fiction is not to *represent* what is given, but to present, or *inaugurate*, what is imaginable.⁵ And so the question becomes: What masculinities, or notions of masculinity, beyond those we (think we) know, are produced in diverse texts of diverse epochs?

The articles collected here constitute an initial response to the call to consider literary texts from the perspective outlined above. In an article that spans a century of literary history, **Monika Pietrzak-Franger** poses the clearly pertinent question of whether Jean Rhys’s feminist revision of Charlotte Brontë actually offers masculine identity more free play than does *Jane Eyre*, and what role textual gaps and silences play in the respective texts’ orchestrations of male identity. It is not a question only of Rochester’s active silences as a character, but also of Brontë’s and Rhys’s, or their narrators’, own textual silences. Contending that “unuttered thoughts, half-pronounced words or a definite refusal to speak are crucial to the understanding of Rochester’s masculinity both in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” the article “determines whether Rochester’s silence undermines the cohesion of his masculinity or, rather, whether he refuses to speak in order to assert his homogenous and hegemonic self.” What Pietrzak-Franger concludes is that, in fact, these latter silences effectively block the understanding of the male character of Rochester – ironically, “they colonise and subdue his voice” – and so, in a way, block the understanding of the male in general and of masculinity. In the process of rendering masculine identity as intrinsically bound up with silence, both texts silence that identity.

Moving to contemporary literature and a less heteronormative masculinity, **Mark John Isola**’s article on Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback

⁴ In the May 2003 issue of *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, Jennifer Esposito looks at the body of Brandon/Teena as specifically a site for the contestation of masculine and feminine gender markers and hence ideologies.

⁵ For a comprehensive and thought-provoking presentation of “inauguration” as an alternative concept through which to think the ontology of fiction, see Gibson 1996: 87-92.

Mountain” reads this novella against the backdrop of Isola’s own research on the use of metaphors of fluidity, in male American writers such as Melville and Whitman, to render homoeroticism. Registering his surprise at discovering a contemporary female writer following the same fluvigraphic poetics, Isola shows how this textual orchestration of a gay masculinity is ultimately disconnected from any corporeally lived sexual or gendered experience – “[t]he persistent productivity of this trope has less to do with the narrative expression of an essentialized homosexual identity [. . .] than it has to do with a pervasive transhistoric cultural anxiety surrounding a transgressive male sexual desire.” Hence, as part of literary, textual tradition, the fluvigraph is accessible to anyone, including a heterosexual woman, wishing to produce gay masculinity textually. Isola also shows that the characters of Ennis and Jack respectively act in accordance with two different scripts of male homosexuality – one of which prescribes passive adaptation and the other of which constitutes an active counter-practice. Thus, Proulx’s text contains at least two competing, or complementary, scripts of masculinity and maleness vis-à-vis homosexuality – which shows that the fluvigraph is not made to present a singular, fixed homosexual masculinity.

Staying with the queer but turning to popular culture, **Virginia Keft-Kennedy** concerns herself with the genre of slash fan fiction, focusing on “Buffyverse” fictions and teasing out the effects of the masculinity they textually render by investigating recurring imagery and tropes which are part of the construction of masculinity. Keft-Kennedy argues that, by means of its handling of such tropes, the genre of slash fiction textually integrates and explores social anxieties related to masculinity, homosociality and homosexuality. The trope of the vampire and tropes related to sexual violence are used to explore aggressive masculinity and male sexuality. The move away from the “shame, trauma, and sense of violation” of realistic rape representations and “the co-dependency of sex and violence” become the imagery through which traditional ideas of gender and empowerment and disempowerment are disrupted. A problematic masculinity is negotiated through textual slippages from rape to seduction, and through the trope of the vampire as morally corrupt per definition, without a conscience and immortal, and thus through “the eroticisation of the hurt yet endlessly restorative undead body”. Keft-Kennedy’s conclusion is two-fold: she doubts the potential

within slash fiction for feminist revisions of traditional ideas about patriarchal roles and hegemonic masculinity, but she simultaneously sees slash as disrupting assumptions about the female gaze by enacting “a cooptation of male homosexuality into women’s socio-sexual economy of desire,” and importantly this homosexuality is envisioned as lying outside the conventions of the traditional romantic paradigm.

Maintaining the discussion of the romantic paradigm, **Anna Fåhraeus** investigates the rewriting of textual masculinity in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, arguing that “gender is treated in the novel as transgressive of sexual boundaries and as vacillating within the subject.” Fåhraeus thus breaks with lesbianist criticism of the novel which faults it for not providing explicitly lesbian content – in other words, for presenting a narrator of uncertain sex and gender. Rather, Fåhraeus is interested in considering the “resistance to a patriarchal heterosexual gender matrix” which the novel effects precisely through its presentation of fluid subjectivity. Importantly, however, while the novel “critiques the heterosexual gender matrix [. . .] the narrative as story does not escape it.” Fåhraeus looks at how the novel incorporates tropes such as those of the rescuer and of love as invasion, which involve a distinctly masculine gendering, and shows that, while these tropes are indeed rewritten and regendered, and are so in a narrative that challenges heterosexual fixity, there are still slippages by which the masculine script is reinstated along heterosexual lines. Yet, ultimately, the novel does succeed in rewriting patriarchal tropes of love and eroticism into something “less traditionally masculine.” And so, perhaps, one may say that the novel *presents*, inaugurates, a hitherto not presented masculinity.

Indeed, that last phrase also forces upon us the realization that we should be speaking here, not of textual masculinity, but of textual masculinities.

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