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Segal, Lynne (2001) "Back to the boys?
Temptations of the good gender theorist". *Textual
Practice* **15** (2). pp. 231-250.

This is an author-produced version of an article published in *Textual Practice* (ISSN 0950-236X). This version has been peer-reviewed, but does not include the final publisher proof corrections, published layout or pagination.

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Citation for this version:

Segal, Lynne (2001) "Back to the boys? Temptations of the good gender theorist". *London: Birkbeck ePrints*. Available at:
<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/archive/00000540>

Citation for the publisher's version:

Segal, Lynne (2001) "Back to the boys? Temptations of the good gender theorist". *Textual Practice* **15** (2). pp. 231-250.

Lynne Segal

Back to the Boys? Temptations of the Good Gender Theorist.

Fig 0. Picture of Dickie

'Manhood', thought Dickie, 'is a very serious business'. Yes, indeed. It is also a joke - evident in that image, produced by my friend at Spark Design, which apparently sold like hot cakes. It sold, because references to men and masculinity nowadays tend to provoke as much mirth as gravity, frolic as anxiety, one way or another. In that respect, at least, the one rarely comes without the other. But humour, as we should know from the long history of woman-baiting (if not from the clinical insights of Freud or the cultural analysis of Roland Barthes) also tells us something about what frightens and troubles us, as much as about what unites and identifies us. Boys; where to begin? how to escape? That is the question it is so hard to avoid right now.

I. THE PROBLEM WITH MEN

'*Can we have a go?*', girls in tights dutifully attending ballet classes each week implore their teacher, here personified by Julie Walters in the film *Billy Elliot*. Not a chance!, I'm afraid. Who want's yesterday's victims?, as Mick Jagger didn't say.¹ *Back to the Boys?* 'Well, I'll be coming (with my back turned, perhaps?)', my gay friends grin, 'queering the pitch'² at once, before I've even passed the baton to Jack Straw, David Blunkett or Tony Blair. But wait, they'll have their say! **Must** we return my erstwhile sisters mourn.³ They are suspicious, as well they might be, of those like me who have helped promote the theoretical shift from Women's to Gender Studies, allowing men to enter and perhaps neutralize that institutional space women fought so hard to create just over two decades ago.⁴ Do 'masculinity studies' appropriate feminist scholarship, resituating men the new authorities on gender matters; making men the latest victims of normative masculinity, even as its coding continues to oppress and exclude women?⁴ Not necessarily, I will suggest; some are sensitive to dilemmas of side-lining feminism for the re-branding of masculinity.⁵ But can women, as Anthony Clare pleads, show our compassion for the boys.⁶

Certainly, we are knocking our heads, as never before, against problems of men and masculinity. Women, and not only of feminist formation, have of course been worrying about masculinity for rather a long time (when not too discouraged by the knocks our various organs may have sustained from the object of our concern: with one attack every minute reported to the Metropolitan police, and two deaths a week, on the latest police figures)⁷ Men, as many of us know, may until recently 'have escaped worrying over this problem', not just (to transpose Freud, in fine facetious flow) because 'you **are** the problem', but rather because, until

yesterday, it rarely occurred to you, that you **could** be! You had to gain the knowledge that you belong to a specific gender, rather than to the universal mould, to begin to apprehend the ways in which masculinity too was a hazardous estate, a paradoxical affair – something most women have in some sense always known of their situation. So addressing men’s predicament, I’m trying to suggest, is a tricky venture: sliding between the grim and the comical.

In illustration, listen to David Blunkett (currently in charge of spreading wisdom in the land), who mere months ago was pronouncing the educational failure and low self-esteem of some boys the product of our schools having allowed too much equality, too much ‘aggressive assertiveness’, in girls. He even thought it wise to warn women, especially ‘young women’, that unless things change ‘there will be a very substantial backlash from males’.⁸ (Backlash? **What**, more than two deaths a week? More than some woman slapped every 6 seconds, if girls keep doing their homework, and boys don’t?) Such disquiet, all because, just because, for the first time ever, less than 1% of girls out-performed boys at A-levels last year.⁹ The really significant differences in educational outcome, of course (here obscured by spurious gender contrasts), are those between boys themselves – along familiar class and ethnic lines.

Should we laugh or should we cry, as the shelves are still stacked high, not just with books by men, but now with books about men?; not just with tales of men at large, but with tales of men and their precarious feelings. Tolerant amusement, more than alarm and threat, are most evident when thoughts on masculinity enter the popular domain, in Nick Hornsby’s self-mocking worship of football (football as masculinity’s *doppelganger*) or in all the ‘*Men Behaving Badly*’ routines; ‘behaving badly’ another synonym for boyhood. But, these engaging ‘Bad Boys’ occlude more than elucidate those actual boys the media doesn’t usually want us to see (although they sometimes display them for titillation or cautionary indictment): like young black American men, a staggering 80% of whom have criminal convictions, ensuring that their homeland, with only 5% of the world’s population, has 25% of its prisoners.¹⁰ Some men really do suffer terribly, die from their suffering, even those – especially those – who present the greatest threat to women, and men (those furthest from the ascendancy masculinity symbolically confers). And that’s no joke at all.

Which brings us to the heart of the matter. What *is* masculinity? Do we know it when we see it? Radical feminists did, and equated it either with biological maleness (let’s pass over that even that category has been complicated lately by, among other things, awareness of the ‘intersexed’)¹¹ and/or with the power men have wielded over women of their own class and kind, with their shared belief in their entitlement to do so. It is a power which persuasive feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, once declared ‘a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control’. Thus, when I published my own book on masculinity, *Slow Motion*, exactly a decade ago, I was firmly criticised by many feminists (and men sympathetic to them [once to my astonishment by the life guard at my local

swimming pool, an Essex student]) for being ‘too soft on men’: for refusing to equate masculinity and violence. I had described complexity and contradiction, support as well as dominance and abuse: whether in relations between men and women, in relations between different groups of men, between women, or in facing up to women’s own inner conflicts, to acknowledging our own competitiveness, aggression and, what proved most provocative then, our own interpersonal violence. Yes, we do hit those we love, though usually effecting less physical injury than men more routinely cause.¹²

Times change. In contrast, the latest feminist criticism of my earlier work comes from the opposite direction, and is - at the very least - a telling sign of changing theoretical fashions as deconstruction and queer readings replaced feminist scholarship at the cutting edge of theory during the 1990s, troubling the meanings of gender theory (which had only just got a grip on post-structuralism, via the infamous trio - Lacan, Derrida and Foucault.).¹³ It was delivered to me (indirectly) by the feminist/queer theoretician Judith Halberstam suggesting that, along with the rest of what was fast becoming the burgeoning Men’s Studies literature of the mid-1990s, I had failed to separate masculinity from maleness, masculinity from men’s power. Although I had, like Bob Connell, pointed to the diversities of masculinities, and to the instabilities/fraudulence of its dominant ideals (noting that the assertion of ‘manhood’ was always reliant on maintaining its difference from, dominance over, some subordinate term it could never hold securely in place – like ‘femininity’), I had failed to deal with the phenomenon she herself explores and exemplifies: ‘female masculinity’, or rather, this too being a complex identity, female masculinities.

Halberstam brings her interdisciplinary ‘queer methodology’ to people and texts depicting the ‘female husband’, the ‘androgynous’ of old; the more familiar ‘tomboy’, ‘butch dyke’ or ‘lesbian boy’ today, the great appeal of the latter (at least for some of my friends) being that she will never grow into a man - even pumping iron, sporting leather or shooting-up testosterone. As an alternative form of masculinity, detached from actual men, these figures can provide an important way of rethinking oppressive aspects of dominant notions of masculinity, Halberstam argues, undermining the fact that masculinity in our society still conjures up ‘a naturalized relation between maleness and power’.¹⁴ True enough. As Eve Sedgwick has also argued, we need to question the assumption that everything which seems distinctive about men can be classified as masculinity, and everything which can be said about masculinity ‘pertains in the first place to men’. ‘As a woman’, she says, ‘I am a consumer of masculinities, but I am not more so than men are; and, like men, I as a woman am also a producer of masculinities, and a performer of them.’¹⁵

A performer of masculinity? Well, on certain readings. To see this, we have to accept, along with Halberstam, that although nowadays we certainly have difficulties defining masculinity (or femininity), given what we know of its mutating, multiple expressions, masculine iconicity is still clear enough for us to have ‘little trouble recognizing it’ or working to affirm the versions of it we like -

even if we happen to be female. But when a woman, whether lesbian, bi- or heterosexual can exemplify 'masculinity' (as the broncho-riding, gun slinging American cowgirl, the eponymous heroine of *Annie get Your Gun* foreshadowed), its contingent, protean and inclusive character is such that, I fear, we may be in danger of by-passing rather than eroding its weighty cultural and symbolic intimidations and exclusions. It is these intimidations and exclusions which, Sedgwick and Halberstam would agree, so haunt the lives of both women and men. When women display power, assertiveness, physical prowess, intellectual rigour, aggression or simply black leather boots, how useful is it, I wonder, to view this as 'performing masculinity', rather than as aspects of 'femininity', the 'femininity', perhaps, of the pre-pubescent girl, less compliant to coercive gender interpolations?

In more recent years, especially in *Why Feminism?* (Segal, 1999) I have explored the moves from gender to queer, and the extent to which 'Queory' (as they say in Sussex) helps us exit from traditional codings linking masculinity to cultural power, bodily activity and heterosexual normativity. For however significant 'queering' has been in displaying gender categories as flexible and diffuse, and it has, I see problems accompanying its own continuing obsessions with gender polarities, however newly conceived as fragile, fluid, prosthetically induced or performatively transgressive. It seems to me that the old gender markings, and the hierarchical relation between them, remain in place in transgendered bodies and performances, as my friend Mandy Merck spells out: 'Drag fascinates in its simultaneous display of contradictory sexual meanings, not in their resolution or dispersal. It no more transcends gender than Michael Jackson's surgically altered appearance transcends race'.¹⁶

This would suggest that contemporary preoccupations with gender outlaws - female masculinity, cross-dressing, transexuality, and other combined and repackaged gender and sexual signifiers - might also be thought to keep us *all the more in thrall* to their now ever-expanding demands and anxieties, fears and pleasures. Indeed, female to male transsexual Jay Prosser argues, against Halberstam, that if we listen carefully to transsexual and transgendered narratives, they tell us more about the continuing cultural force of feelings of biological embodiedness, and related gender belonging, revealing 'not the revelation of the fictionality of gendered categories but [rather] the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power'.¹⁷

THEORIZING MASCULINITY

However, general theoretical manoeuvres around, and for some beyond, the analytics of recent gender scholarship, are not my primary concern here. Nor, certainly (though perhaps they should be), is this the dilemma engaging most of those now responsible for the deluge of books, research and punditry on men and masculinity engulfing us from the 1990s. So, I will swerve swiftly to survey this new frontier: anxieties about boys and men, and how we should address them. It is a new phenomenon – or least appears to be – because once it was *always* women, *only* women who were thought to be: the ‘Problem Sex’ [for sociologist, Alva Myrdal]; the ‘Dark Continent’ [for Freud]; the ‘Dangerous Sex’ [‘the devil hid in women’s smiles’, all culture knew]. Forget it! (Well, except for those threatening/diabolic traits men still so often see in women’s smiles, women’s success.) By the close of the 20th Century, men had emerged as the threatened and fragile sex [‘Why the Frail Sex is Male’, read a *Guardian* caption last year: actually imposed upon my review of Susan Faludi’s tome, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*¹⁸ (which, on the surface, looks a little like 1990s’ reparation for her 1980s’ revelations of men’s determined fight against women’s equality in *Backlash*). Men are our latest victims, even as they remain the belligerent sex, figuratively, the sex still born-to-rule, the master sex.

The statistics are not unfamiliar. Research informing us of boys greater likelihood of educational failure and rising suicide when compared to girls, men’s higher levels of alcoholism, drug addiction, serious accidents, anti-social behaviour, cardiovascular disease, avoidance of available health care and earlier death when compared to women, surfaces in all recent research on masculinity. That emanating from psychology in the 1990s often begins from the notion ‘masculinity in crisis’, deploying concepts like ‘gender-role strain’/role ‘conflict’.¹⁹ Which leads at once to the questions: *Is this a new phenomenon?* Is it a *response to feminism?* What exactly is the problem? Most importantly: *What can be done about it?*

First things first: anxieties about manhood are usually anxieties about gender and shifting gender relations, that is, about men’s relation to women.

Of course, until recent times we did not even have any developed notion of ‘gender’, except as a grammatical term tied to anatomical sexual difference. It was born with contemporary feminism, in the wake of de Beauvoir (two decades after her fighting words echoed Wollstonecraft’s two hundred years earlier: ‘One is not born but becomes a woman; it is society as a whole that creates her’).²⁰ Soon gender, as pivotal social issue, and central axis of power, would be found - and then fought over – everywhere. Its theoretical trajectory was always going to be complex, because the grounding for who and what we become as women and men can be seen as operating at so many different levels. Gender resides in symbolic systems, Adam and Eve, our position in language and all the ways we can speak and be spoken of. It is found in the psychological formation of our complicated

sense of ourselves (conscious and unconscious). It is a feature of interpersonal relations, how we are socially included or excluded, praised or policed by others. It infuses institutional structures of power, exalted and mundane, concerning exactly who controls what, and right up there at the very top, that's where you'll still find the Big Boys, the Masters of the Universe – Bushmen or Goremen, could one tell the difference (not the American electorate, for sure). This means that although our sense of being men or women seems the bedrock of our being, it is exceedingly complex, both in its psychic grip (sometimes felt as central, sometimes irrelevant, so restlessly confusing) and in its unstable cultural framing (yesterday's model; today's cast-off). But to see this we have to travel between disciplines and draw upon very different theoretical traditions.

Not surprisingly, pressures to simplify and collapse gender into individual sex differences, contrasting identities, fixed social roles, symbolic location or, the latest fashionable, probably most fanciful invention, our evolutionary history, are compelling - all the more compelling trying to pin us down as one aspect of gender or another is always on the move again. This feeds the feuds within feminism between those who stress the psychic life of difference and those who study the inequalities of the gender order.²¹ Moreover, as we saw with boys and education, nowadays the multiple positions we occupy, of class, ethnicity or other sources of power or vulnerability are often ignored, replaced by spurious gender contrasts. These dilemmas, not least that of men's uneven purchase on power over others, produce many of the mystifications in the statistics and scholarship on men and masculinity. But I must pause, just one last time, before full frontal assault on my topic - the 'serious business' of manhood.

Let me condense quickly what gender research on women and femininity revealed, when conducted over the last three decades. It conveyed evidence of abounding misery and gender injustice – from cradle to grave – whether in women's greater vulnerability to psychological humiliations, our unequal shouldering of social burdens or our levels of frustration in heterosexual encounters and relationships.²² At the same time, however, feminism inspired the richest range of cultural creativity, often celebrating what appeared most distinctive about women's bodies, lives and feelings as women.²³ But, here's the oddity. What men found, when finally, in the wake of feminism, they turned to survey themselves (it no longer sufficing merely to scrutinise and reify women), provided an analogue of women's adversities: evidence of constraint, unease, misery, trying to embody the ideals of masculinity. And this soon engendered the parallel rise of Men's Studies, outlining men's gender specific problems. Men joined us as gender scholars.

The male sex role literature of the 1970s reported the burdens of men: distant fathers; impractical expectations; muted emotions; fears of intimacy, and so on.²⁴ In the 1980s, the prominent masculinity researcher in the US, the psychologist Joseph Pleck, tightened his account of men's gender role strain to emphasise the many contradictory demands on men. Those who tried hardest to conform, he said, were the most miserable. But it remained unclear, not for the first time, quite what

the psychologists were reporting. Was it something inside men that needs changing, a bit of biology plus social learning or, as Pleck suggested, something external to them, a set of conflicting expectations/discourses, hitherto inescapable, but now adjustable? The overall conclusion Pleck drew was that social expectations must be changed.²⁵

However, it was only in *the 1990s* that efforts to reform masculinity and re-skill men for new times increased ten-fold, generating greater research and publications throughout the social sciences.²⁶ These combined social learning/social construction theories with fragments of psychoanalytic thought (such as father absence; early traumatic rupture from mother), with a tributary stream expanding from evolutionary psychology. This accompanied a new emphasis on the importance of hands-on fathering (now that fatherhood itself was more precarious, with women's growing financial independence making it possible for them to choose to end marriages). In this 'masculinity in crisis' literature, as Roger Horrocks wrote in his book of that title, men are everywhere haunted by feelings of emptiness; impotence; rage.²⁷ We know the phrase is ubiquitous when the media's favourite psychiatrist, Anthony Clare, chooses to run with it today.²⁸ For Horrocks, such crisis suggests the need for more sophisticated psychoanalytic understanding of the deep conflicts feeding men's agitation.

There is a Freudian tale of the production of such conflict, the rule that one cannot desire, and also identify with, the same object, the same person. We can't, but perhaps we do; perhaps, we always do, but then have to work to suppress what we have done. It is this suppression of, this bifurcation out of, having once both desired and identified with those we first knew and loved - usually mothers and fathers, but especially mothers - which constitutes the shaky beginnings of our formative sense of sexual difference. That is the polarity which men fear might simply melt away; which is always in danger of dissolving, should men let down their guard. Stand firm! Keep alert! This is certainly one compelling account of the fragility of sexual difference. It is that sense of difference which men have wanted, Freudians significantly among them, to secure in fantasies of the inescapable symbolic power of the permanently erect penis, the phallus, in the construction of sexual difference. Indeed, for Lacan, this is and must remain all there is to the story of sexual difference; enshrining for evermore the formation of human subjectivity, human culture in the existing metaphorical figuring of the social asymmetry of gender: 'It is the world of words that creates the world of things. Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man'.²⁹ Man, not woman, is indeed positioned at the centre of language, but I am unconvinced that there could be no primordial production of subjectivity except through recognition of sexual difference, except through this particular Oedipalized story of the rupturing of the child's solipsistic obsession with its M/other.

III REFORMING MASCULINITY?

Despite mushrooming concern with men's subjectivities, some of the first and most authoritative gender theorists (indeed, those influencing and closest to my own work), for example, the Australian sociologist Bob Connell, remained critical of the new literature. Two decades of theoretical and empirical research on men and masculinity left him still seeing no intrinsic attributes of masculinity. Instead, he described 'masculinity' as a complex project in which men collectively engage in diverse practices, drawing upon the different cultural understandings and resources available to them within hierarchical gender regimes.³⁰ The body matters; it is not just a text, but always only as created and experienced within shifting social relations. Collecting men's stories of their physical capacities, shared and secret desires, successes and failures, led Connell and his co-researchers to delineate images of multiple masculinities. Yet, however particular men's personal trajectory and sense of belongings, he argued, they are all constrained by the force of, and their fantasy relation to, a dominant or hegemonic ideal of masculinity as tough, heterosexual, authoritative, successful (elsewhere depicted as phallic or patriarchal masculinity). Whether positioned as marginal or subordinate to that ideal, complicitous with or resisting its allure, what remained emblematic of hegemonic masculinity was its ties to images of power and control over anything indicative of weakness, failure, effeminacy - whether in women, other men or, importantly, in repudiated aspects of oneself.

The 'masculinity in crisis' literature is problematic insofar as it ignores the central issue: the pay-offs men receive (or hope to receive) from their claims to manhood.³¹ For while men everywhere express their anxieties and loss of former privileges, overall they are conceived of and remain the dominant sex. Whatever else it is, certainly hard enough to specify, 'masculinity' condenses a certain engagement with power, however unrealized and, largely, unrealizable. But that is, of course, the problem: the source of the misery and crisis: Men will fail, and fail again, to measure up to its promise. Masculinity is always in crisis.

It is easy to write movingly of the leading losers in this harsh game, those definitively excluded by ideals of straight, white, authoritative manliness: most evident in the subordinated practices characterising gay masculinities and, in more contradictory and ambivalent ways, working class and black masculinities. I've taken this line myself. It is encouraging to think of the investment some men might have in opposing or revealing the fraudulence of dominant ideals of manhood; there have always been traitors to the manly cause. But men furthest from displaying the presumptions of ideal masculinity, including gay men, may be most antipathetic to divesting themselves of its symbolic trappings. Leo Bersani, for one, depicts gay male desire as quintessential erotic investment in the phallus.³² In yearning for it, rather than simply trying to simulate it, however, gay men also subvert its rules: above all, when they surrender to the annihilating joys of passivity - annihilating because passivity, of course, is registered as the quintessentially feminine.

More recently, within my own formative discipline, psychology, some of the most sophisticated studies of masculinity have questioned the purchase and meaning of notions of 'hegemonic masculinity'. Margaret Wetherall and Nigel Edley, analysing young men's 'discursive practices' to see how they construct their sense of identity, report that most spoke of their distance from notions of heroic masculinity: about which they were ironic; playful; detached.³³ Moreover, as their own and other research on black male youth indicate, the forms of 'physical toughness' and 'emotional coolness' seen as characterising dominant masculinity are often most pronounced in boys and men most lacking in social power (and help to keep them that way).³⁴ True enough. However, in my home base at Birkbeck, Stephen Frosh and his fellow researchers interviewing 11 to 14 year-old London schoolboys, illustrate how boys still forcefully police themselves and each other by teasing banter to be tough (but not too tough); cool (but not stupid); good at sport; not a swat; not 'gay'; not soft. These prevailing notions of hegemonic masculinity are indeed multifaceted and shifting, strongly inflected by class, race and other affiliations, but none the less their power and pervasiveness hugely narrows the range of permissible boys' behaviour. And this is so, even though boys know that they will fall short of the ideals themselves.³⁵

In my other, new disciplinary home, the expanding sphere of English and the Humanities, masculinity studies are also on the move, manifest at the recent international conference in Liverpool, *Posting the Male*. Here, the full resources of deconstruction were on display: contributors seeking gender-bending, cross-sex identifications in texts and audiences relocating/refiguring the 'masculine' outside or beyond its normative codings, whether in high or low culture, literary fiction, broadsheets, boys' comics, the 90s' explosion of men's Lifestyle Magazines or on the internet. (Surprisingly, for those excited by the feminist dreams of Donna Haraway or Sadie Plant celebrating the birth of revolutionary cyborgs, liberated from earthly gendered shackles, observers find that such creatures do not often materialize in Internet relay chat mediums, where sexual configurations remain remarkably male-oriented and normative.)³⁶ Theoretically, though, poststructuralist accounts of ever more elaborate (if increasingly abstract and abstruse) semiotic and genealogical analysis have provided new approaches to subjectivity, sexual difference and the materialization of the body through, and (on some readings) only through, its discursive mapping.

IV TEXTURAL PRACTICES

After Derrida, we know that any hierarchical binary is always slippery, always menaced by its dependence on the subordinated contrasts securing its meaning. Simply in our quotidian deployment of language, self-descriptions prove complex, unstable, mutating. As Judith Butler writes, representations, however seemingly fixed, can be conceived as 'open to significant rearticulations and transformations under the pressure of social practices of various kinds'.³⁷ Even though, for those

coming from the base of any binary, the under-side of anything at all, it may feel, it may be, impossible to escape the reiterative disparagement, the recurring restrictions, the offensive attentions, which incessantly enclose and diminish us. And yes, there is a beyond to discourse, not just our sensate, mindful bodies, but those 'social practices of various kinds', all entangled with power, all regulated by profit (cry foul and fundamentalist, cry resurrected Marxist, if you like!). It may prove impossible even to imagine how to escape the misinterpretations of others, even when we do not recognise ourselves within them; impossible, by the same token, however, to feel satisfied with our own version of ourselves. Something is always lacking trying to account for ourselves in language. Ironically, although told to view such semantic ruminations as recent, to characterise the 'turn to language' and its deconstruction as not so much modern as 'post-modern' (post-60s; post-70s; post-when-ever-we-learnt this particular scholarly re-branding), it is in actuality not so novel, not so 'post', at all. In her eloquent reflections on the 'unquiet language of the self', Denise Riley reminds us in *The Words of Selves*³⁸ that it is almost 200 years since Hegel observed: 'Everyone is a whole world of representations, which are buried in the world of the "I"'.³⁹ *Welcome to modernity!*

Our claims to identity, whether empowering or diminishing us, and however necessary for uniting us in essential commonalties with others, also serve to obliterate different identifications we might have made, might still make. The most sophisticated know how to soften their grip, how to hang loose, in their identifications; or at least, how to appear to. Men may well yearn to identify with heroic masculinity, but settle for a more fluctuating gallantry – if allowed to. Or, they may evince a defiantly unheroic disintegration, which in its very defiance echoes its antithesis - if all leading status is denied them. Illustrating critical analysis of 'masculinity' as binary, discursive fiction - haunted by all it tries to exclude - Homi Bhabha writes in 'Are You a Man or a Mouse?' (his father's refrain): 'To speak of masculinity in general must be avoided at all costs'. We need not so much to disavow '[it]', as to show how 'its claims to superiority are grounded in contradiction, conflict and anxiety'. Quite so! 'My own masculinity is strangely separated from me, turning into my shadow... My attempt to conceptualize its conditionality becomes a place to question it'.⁴⁰

A place to question it? Only up to a point, he might agree, as one of the most eloquent but also most eminent cultural scholars in the world. Not a mouse but a kitten jumps out before Will Self, when asked to disclose his own sense of manliness, 'a kitten, spinning around and around in a vain attempt to catch sight of its own tail'; though the world, he knows, sees manliness in his every move.⁴¹ A man's place in the world matters, perhaps making him all the more powerfully seductive as he ponders the frailties, faults and fraudulence of a manhood he has come to question. Self's superficially self-flagellating *Perfidious Man* beautifully captures, while simultaneously contravening, the paradoxical atonement of men apparently repudiating phallic masculinity. Designating the transsexual Stephen Whittle's essential vitality, his appearance, demeanour and manner of expressing himself, all exemplary of authentic masculinity, he declares that the presence or

absence of the penis ('what kind of genitals he has') is of little importance. Yet Self has previously highlighted, in words as vivid as he can muster, his awareness of his own father's genitals and the 'nimbus of lust' and horniness which surrounded him: a man who 'pissed like a horse, flattening bracken along the sides of the many paths we walked along'; whose penis poked 'out from its ruff of black pubic hair as if it were the tonsure of some tiny monk he kept secluded in his horrible trousers'.⁴² These contradictions, notwithstanding, we can indeed hasten onwards with a cultural agenda. Knowing the power of words to legitimise the hierarchies they reflect and inscribe, can we not invoke cultural politics to transfigure or reinscribe those superior/inferior linguistic allotments, to emancipate us from the grip of established gender orders?

In *Writing Men* Berthold Schoene-Harwood searches for examples of counter discourses, of forms of '*écriture masculine*' which could be seen as expressive of 'post-patriarchal masculinities' (which he labels 'gynandricity'!). These are discourses creating a space where men's lost language of passivity and helplessness can surface, where men and women can renegotiate their differences. Deploying Cixous, Irigaray and, in particular, Kristeva's notion of a 'subject-in-the-making', he finds regenerative change in recent Scottish fiction, as in Iain Banks's *Wasp Factory*. Here a girl's obsession with masculinity, and a boy's ostensible femininity, eventually rupture to produce their own 'regenerative chaos': the realization that nothing is 'sealed and certain', everything changes.⁴³ True. It is not so difficult to locate subversive texts, which expose the permeabilities and ruptures within the carapace of braced masculinity (meanwhile the boys up North were busy campaigning against the repeal of Clause 28).

In analytical harmony, Calvin Thomas's *Male Matters* unveils men's anxieties at the end of the 20th century, demanding they confront the fears and fictions, erased materialities, turds and tight holes, in men's writing about the body. The unbecomingly named Canadian philosopher, Brian Pronger agrees, arguing in 'On Your Knees' that men must open up their bodies to the possibility of feminism by celebrating new forms of receptive desire, displaying their own passageways to welcome, after Cixous, 'the dwelling place of the other in me'. 'The erotic event of being willingly, ... joyfully, penetrated orally and anally', he writes, 'deterritorializes the bodies of [men] and literally opens the gates to the freedom of demasculinized desire'.⁴⁴ He sees such enthusiastic bodily surrender as subverting the whole 'point of [phallic] masculinity': which has hitherto been 'to become larger, to take up more space, yield less of it', producing normative masculine desire as not so much heterosexual as quintessentially homophobic - a crucial aspect certainly in empirical studies of schoolboys' talk.⁴⁵

Fig 1: My mother occupying little space

Fig 2: My father with his first pronger

These male gender theorists are right to suggest that the body, their body,

‘can defy and defile’ the symbolic and institutional confines of phallic grandiosity (as I tried to illustrate in *Straight Sex*)⁴⁶, although it all sounds much better in poetry. The typically tortuous post-Lacanian or Deleuzian prose they bring to the task conflicts with their palpable subversive intent. To say, for example, that: ‘The anal penis...function(s) within a devalued metonymic continuity, whereas the notion of the phallic turd functions within the realm of metaphorical substitution’ is certainly correct, but not easily digestible.⁴⁷ Indeed, it encourages new turf battles (especially in the US academy) between those committed to cultural analysis and those engaged in socio-economic research, with the doyennes of the former often parodied for promoting obscurantist, elitist pseudo-radicalism by some feminist scholars and also, not long ago, by a rather unimpressive physicist, Alan Sokal.⁴⁸

Regressive as these new Culture Wars are, I think we do have to be wary of ever straying too far into either the cultural or the socio-economic domain, without at the same time seeing that the one needs the other; at least, it does if we are hoping for any political analysis or direction. The problem with deconstructing/refiguring masculinity is that it is just much too easy. Textually, masculinity is the softest nut to crack (the toughest old poseurs, like Norman Mailer, were well aware of that); knowing discourses of men’s frailties and vulnerabilities, behind the masquerade of masculinity are anything but new; masculinity has been deconstructed (shamed and ridiculed) endlessly, with this, on its own, not shifting its symbolic power. We should know by now that it is hard enough to get any grip on meaning-making (given its dependence on discursive context, specific audience reception and diverse social embeddedness) which leaves us with few clues at all about any lasting undoing of meanings, if we stay within the linguistic domain.

Depicting his own topical sense of masochistic male shamefulness, Steve Connor (from my home base in English) asks: ‘where better for a man to hide out today, than in plain view, than in this withering lucidity, this penitential publicity?’⁴⁹ His elegant literary phenomenology, however, at times might be seen as critical theory’s reverberation of the ironic shamelessness which pervades men’s new Lifestyle magazines, like *Loaded*, written, with a flourish, ‘for men who should know better’. *Loaded* encourages its male consumers to mock traditional masculinity in the very act of flaunting it. Such ambiguity or oscillation becomes part of the refashioning of an even more elusive ‘masculinity’, which is ideologically inscrutable, as Bethan Benwell writes, because it is essentially evasive ‘about its own definition’.⁵⁰ Irony enables men strategically to distance themselves from misogyny, homophobia and traditional tough guy ideals, while simultaneously providing an outlet for just such fantasies.

These are, of course, the same fantasies which take us right back to the misery, the destructive self-abuse, the interpersonal violence and the contempt for ‘swats’ with which we began. The greater men’s status and recognition in the world, the more feasible their mocking detachment from heroic muscular masculinity; irony offers far fewer seductions or rewards for the 42% of boys from

the poorest homes in Britain who will become seriously violent by their thirties. Meanwhile, Tony Blair's Labour government has no language at all to address the problem. Tough talk of 'Zero tolerance'; 'crack downs' on 'yob culture'; cleansing the streets of shameless squeegee merchants, exemplifies and encourages that same macho posturing it supposedly deplores. Farcical government curfew schemes are worse than senseless, when the Home Office's own funded research tells them that the three most common experiences of boys who become violent are severe physical punishment, parental conflict and maternal depression, all endured and witnessed within those parlours to which Labour would confine them. One man's irony, is another man's fractured skull.

Let us return to my four earlier questions: Are men's problems new? Are they a response to feminism? What is the problem? What is the solution? No, they are not new; No, they are not primarily a response to feminism; 'masculinity' is itself the problem, and - as I said once before - the motion of symbolic and institutional change is slow.⁵¹ With or without feminism, men are at war with themselves and each other over manhood: 'one does grow tired of being a man', Steve Connor writes, reprising Beckett's anti-hero - Moran.⁵² It is the toughest old guys, like Papa Hemingway, who blow their brains out - no feminist pulls the trigger.

Anxiety and insecurity have always shadowed men's assertions of virility. The search for affirmations of 'manhood' remains the cause of, not than the solution to, men's problems. Men have always been forced into proofs of 'manhood' to ward off the dangers of 'feminization': through obsessive self-control, defensive exclusion and fantasies of escape. Attempts to reform masculinity meet the obstacle that the most familiar, the easiest way to assuage, if not arrest, men's chronic fears and shame over whether they are 'man enough' has been in blaming women (men are losing because women are winning – sound familiar?). This is the sentiment that Faludi recorded, as Americans sought solace from unforeseen redundancies, shrinking wage packets, expanding working days and chronic job insecurity.⁵³ Cue Blunkett, cue Bly, cue evolutionary psychology, cue Melanie Phillips, and all. The idea that it is not women who are responsible for men's dread of effeminacy, but men themselves in their attempt to affirm mastery, cannot similarly soothe crushed egos, caustic resentments.

When the governing image of masculinity New Labour extols is virile disciplinarianism and strict paternalism, it is clear we have little official rethinking, and even less practical encouragement, for boys themselves to break out of constraining gender stereotypes. It is important to foster openness and compassion in men, although, men will only fully escape old anxieties around manhood when the whole edifice of gender hierarchy has ceased to exist. Women have lived with the paradoxes of our identities for a very long time. We're still waiting for men to recognise the complexity of the challenges they face. Can we manage to communicate across our differences? For this, for sure, there is still work to be done by the good-enough gender theorist, forever vigilant to the conceits of gender

cliché: whether embracing new fundamentalisms or performing over-hasty subversions.

NOTES

¹ ‘Alas, pitiable boy’, as Virgil did, in high Roman fashion, but he had yet to register the humanity of girls).

² See David Glover and Cora Kaplan, *Genders*, chapter 3, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

³ Perhaps aware that, with all this brotherly concern, no synonym can be found for her affinities in my UK thesaurus shortened for Word 2000, while eight equivalents attend her male sibling.

⁴ In the USA, the male gender theorist, Calvin Thomas recently did a survey to discover how many men had been hired in positions advertised as ‘gender studies’ in English departments and did find that some had indeed been made, in one case a ‘women’s studies’ position transmuting into ‘gender studies’ in order to hire a man. See Calvin Thomas (1999)

⁵ Although, it seems, few notice that most spending in recent New Deal programmes here have been on groups of men, roughly twice that spent per head, for example, on the shorter training periods offered lone mothers). See Katherine Rake, ‘Men First: Women are missing out on the New Deal programme for the unemployed. Most spending is going to predominantly male groups.’ *The Guardian*, Tuesday, June 20, 2000.

⁶ Anthony Clare, *On Men*, 2000.

⁷ Nick Hopkins, ‘The tide of violence in the home’, *The Guardian*, October 26, 2000, p.6, reporting on Betsy Stanko’s latest research on police records across the UK, with two women a week killed by men.

⁸ David Blunkett, quoted in Yvonne Roberts, ‘Blaming the Girls’, *The Guardian*, August 22, 2000, p.16.

⁹ 0.6, to be precise, in *ibid*.

¹⁰ See David McGowen, *Derailing Democracy: The America the Media Don’t Want to See*, Common Courage Press, 2000.

¹¹ Kessler; Fausto-Stirling

¹² See Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion*, London, Virago, 1990, ch.9.

¹³ See *More Gender trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, in *differences*, Vol 6, nos.2-3, Summer-Fall, 1994.

¹⁴ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Durham and London, Duke Univ Press, 1998, p.2).

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "'Gosh Boy George, You Must Be awfully Secure in Your Masculinity'", in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger et.al., London, Routledge, 1995, p.12; p.13.

¹⁶ Mandy Merck, 'Figuring Out Andy Warhol' in Jennifer Doyle et. al. (eds) *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, London, Durham and Duke University Press, 1996, p.234.

¹⁷ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p.11.

¹⁸ Segal, 'Why the Frail Sex is Male', *The Guardian*, Oct 9, 1999, p..

¹⁹ See Trefor Lloyd and Tristan Wood (eds) *What Next for Men?* (London, Working With Men, 1996); D.Sabo and D.F.) eds) *Men's Health and Illness: Gender, Power and the Body* (London: Sage, 1995)

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*...

²¹ See Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999; New York: Columbia, 2000), chapter 7.

²² Rhoda Unger and Mary Crawford, *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992).

²³ Fighting all that had constrained them, girls and women were soon laughing, shouting, delineating and sharing the news that women could become, women could do, anything and everything! In certain empowering domains, anyway.

²⁴ Found in the writings of Jack Sawyer, Warren Farrell and others. Anti-sexist at first, Farrell later switched sides; others never have.

²⁵ Joseph Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1981). .

²⁶ For example, Levant & Pollack, *The New Psychology of Men*, 1995; see Edley and Wetherall for commentary.

²⁷ Roger Horrocks, *Men in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities*, London, macmillan, 1994;

²⁸ Anthony Clare, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2000.

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, 'Écrits', 65.

³⁰ Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995.

³¹ See also Jeff Hearn in the UK, Michael Messner or Kimmell in the USA.

³² Leo Bersani

³³ Margaret Wetherall and Nigel Edley, 'Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psycho-Discursive Practices', *Feminism and Psychology*, 1999, 9, pp335-356.

³⁴ Edley and Wetherall, London:Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf; 1995; Majors and Billson, 1992; Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998.

³⁵ Ann Phoenix, Stephen Frosh, 'Positioned by "Hegemonic" Masculinities: A Study of London Boys' Narratives of Identity, *Australian Psychologist*, 2001.

³⁶ Don Slater, 'Trading Sexpics on IRC: Embodiment and Authenticity on the Internet', *Body & Society*, 1998, vol 4, 4, 91-117.

³⁷ Judith Butler, 'Against proper Objects', p.20.

³⁸ Which, as she notes gleefully, mutates at a glance into '*The Swords of Elves*'.

³⁹ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, Stanford, California, Stanford University press, 2000, p.9.

⁴⁰ Homi Bhabha in Berger, Wallace and Watson. 1995, op. cit., p.58.

⁴¹ Will Self & David Gamble, 'Perfidious Man', London, Viking, 2000, p.8. I am grateful to my colleague Steve Connor for drawing my attention to this work.

⁴² Self, *ibid*, p.3; p.4

⁴³ Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man*, 2000, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Univ press, 2000, p114;115.

⁴⁴ Helene Cixous, 'Sorties', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed J.Rivkin and M.Ryan, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p.583; Brian Pronger, 'On Your Knees: Carnal Knowledge, Masculine Dissolution, Doing Feminism', in *Men Doing Feminism*, ed. Tom Digby, London, Routledge, p.72.

⁴⁵ See Peter Redman, "'Tared with the same Brush": "Homophobia" and the Role of the Unconscious in School-based cultures of masculinity', *Sexualities*. Vol 3, no 4: 483-499; Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson, *Schooling sexualities*, Buckingham, Open Univ. press, 1998; Phoenix and Frosh, op cit.

⁴⁶ Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*, London, Virago, 1994.

⁴⁷ Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters* (Urbana and Chicago, Univ. of Illinois Press, 1996, p.24)

⁴⁸ See Alan Sokal (1996) 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text* spring/summer, no. 46; Martha Nussbaum: 'The hip defeatism of Judith Butler: The Professor of Parody', *The New Republic*, February 22, 1999. For insightful discussion, see commentary by various scholars including Donna Haraway, 'The Sokal Affair: A Postscript'; Ken Hirschkop, 'Cultural Studies and its Discontents: A Comment on the Sokal Affair', and other responses in *Social Text*, 50, 1997.

⁴⁹ Steve Connor, 'The Shame of being a Man', unpub. <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/skc/shame/>

⁵⁰ Bethan Benwell

⁵¹ Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion*.

⁵² Connor *ibid*.

⁵³ Faludi, *op cit*.