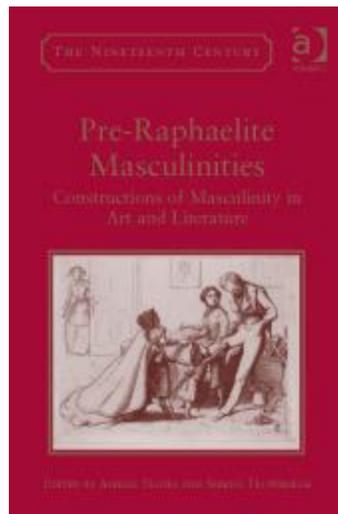


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Guest Edited by Kate Holterhoff and Nicole Lobdell



Brotherhood: Interrogating Pre-Raphaelite Manliness

[*Pre-Raphaelite Masculinities*](#). Edited by Amelia Yeates and Serena Trowbridge. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. 251 pp.

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<1> “The privileging of detail over unified perspective in Pre-Raphaelite painting can thus be seen as... an aggressive ostentation of nervous irritability which might be compared, somewhat anachronistically, to the stuttering in The Who’s song ‘My Generation’ (1965), as a displaced symptom of aggression” (66). Such a playful yet illuminating comment characterizes the best of the scholarship in *Pre-Raphaelite Masculinities*, a collection of essays edited by Amelia Yeates and Serena Trowbridge. This volume represents a welcome and engaging addition to the field of Pre-Raphaelite studies, one that tidily fulfills its stated objectives of contributing to the study of masculinities in the Victorian period via a particular attention to the artists related to the mid-century art movement (1). In a responsibly historical manner, the editors define the frequently baggy rubric of “Pre-Raphaelitism” by focusing on members of the original group of painters and poets who coined the term for their peculiar form of archaizing modernity with which they hoped to reform British painting at mid-century. The trio of John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti formed the nucleus of a group of young men known as

the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a name which, the editors note, has to a great extent screened “masculinity” from scholarly view in analyses of the Pre-Raphaelites, due to the extent to which their identity as a fraternity naturalized the term. Rossetti is a particularly prominent figure here, as his close associates Edward Coley Burne-Jones, William Morris, and William Bell Scott are also subjects of consideration in a well-edited and carefully produced collection that spans a range of intriguing topics.

<2>One group of essays treats the gendered experiences or expressions of the artists themselves. Jay D. Sloan, for instance, boldly insists on the importance of artistic intentionality by observing Rossetti’s strategic experimentation with “feminized” (18) positions. Sloan considers the subversive aspects of the poet-painter’s unguardedly passionate male narrator in a culture in which middle-class masculinity was defined in part by emotional control. Citing what may be one of the most quoted lines on masculinity, Judith Butler’s field-changing statement on gender as performative, “a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (40), Ingrid Hanson links William Morris’ interest in “temporary destabilizing and decentering of the self-controlled male and a merging of the masculine and feminine as the basis of change” (44) to his later formation as a socialist. In this set of essays, it is nice to see some of the more obscure figures and artworks in the Pre-Raphaelite circle generating new scholarship, as in Rosemary Mitchell’s “Marginal Masculinities: Regional and Gender Borders in William Bell Scott’s Wallington Scheme.”

<3>Other writers in the volume consider stylistic expressions with reference to how they might have been understood in gendered terms. In “The Hallucination of the Real: Pre-Raphaelite Vision as a Crisis of Romantic Masculinity,” Gavin Budge’s intelligent reading of certain distinctive stylistic elements of Pre-Raphaelite painting in light of dominant paradigms of manliness reminds us of the potentially revolutionary aspects of the group. In the context of the social tensions before the 1867 Reform Act, the spatial illegibility, the extreme investment in the specific and individual, and the lack of a single organizing perspective in Pre-Raphaelite paintings could be seen as the aesthetic of democracy (61). Budge’s original and compelling argument takes off from this point to build a narrative about the Romantic lineage of the nervously irritable visionary self that became aligned with the feminine, the working class, and the democratic (64-72). The author includes useful comparisons to other artistic forms of the period, such as sensation novels, which he notes disintegrated into a series of sensational moments in much the same way Pre-Raphaelite paintings resisted conventional coherence into a whole (75). Likewise focusing on style, Amelia Yeates treats the reception of Burne-Jones’ pictures as diseased and un-masculine (81).

<4>Other essayists examine specific, fruitful themes in relation to Victorian masculinity. Simon Cooke contemplates the emasculating resonances of reverie, noting that imagination can function as an “alternative sort of male energy” (133-134), while Dinah Roe in turn treats the matter of celibacy in her study of the Pre-Raphaelite attempt to infuse contemporary life with beauty, spirituality, and passion. In a provocative new angle on artistic engagements with Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, including Burne-Jones’ painting *Laus Veneris* (1872-73) and Augustus Charles Swinburne’s poetry, Sally-Anne Huxtable argues that the pre-Christian Venusberg provided an alternative space to that of patriarchal Christianity (184-5). Huxtable suggests that the myth operated as a “cipher for diverse queer practices and ideas, an imagined aesthetic space which purposely disrupts cultural norms” (169).

<5>The concluding essay by Eleanor Fraser Stansbie, "Christianity, Masculinity, Imperialism: *The Light of the World* and Colonial Contexts of Display," contemplates the ways in which a fetishized male body was at the center of the imperial project. Stansbie guides the reader through a productive visual analysis of three versions of Hunt's iconic image of Christ holding a lantern that considers how their exhibition contexts produced particular meanings. She poignantly concludes with a discussion of the Australian tour of one picture in 1906, where it attracted up to 40,000 visitors in Hobart when displayed alongside the skeleton of the Tasmanian Aborigine, Truganini, billed as "the last of her race" (208).

<6>Some apparently trivial aspects of this volume contribute greatly to its usability. It is a pleasure to have notes at the bottom of the page rather than at the end of the essay, for instance, and the full bibliography is welcome. The careful and attentive editing is obvious in every essay, as is the selection of themes and topics that nicely complement one another. Admirably the editors were able to coax from the publishers a number of illustrations, although the art history essays are still not as well served as they might have been.

<7> The introduction, by Amelia Yeates and Serena Trowbridge, nods to feminist theory (2-3), which originally catalyzed the probing and dismantling of gender categories, as well as to foundational texts in the study of the nineteenth-century male, such as Martin A. Danahay's *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Ashgate, 2005). The reader is prompted to wonder about more recent directions in masculinity studies, but this question does not interfere with the considerable intellectual appeal of *Pre-Raphaelite Masculinities*, which provides a necessary and important balance to the previous scholarly emphasis on the representation of femininity in the world and work of the Pre-Raphaelites.