

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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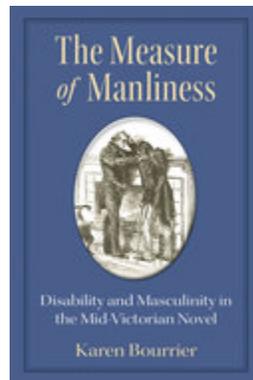
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Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

Guest Edited by Lara Karpenko and Lauri Dietz

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### Disabled Masculinities in Domestic Realist Fiction

[\*The Measure of Manliness: Disability and Masculinity in the Mid-Victorian Novel\*](#). Karen Bourrier. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2015. 184 pp.

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<1>It is easy to say that a man has a “huge frame” and “iron muscles,” and to assign to him all the other conventional proofs of strength . . . but it is a much more difficult and delicate matter to describe the influence which a constitution of that kind would produce upon habits of thought and feeling.’<sup>(1)</sup> So writes James Fitzjames Stephen in 1858 of the representational challenge posed by the uncommunicative masculine ideal emerging in the mid-nineteenth century. The 1850s witnessed a critical juncture in the history of masculinity: the eighteenth-century “man of feeling” gave way to the silent, muscular man of action as the normative mode of masculinity. In *The Measure of Manliness*, part of the Corporealities: Discourses of Disability series, Karen Bourrier shows how Victorian authors defined this new taciturn figure, generally appearing as the self-made man or the muscular Christian, against a disabled or chronically ill masculinity. Although she locates its reverberations in modernist and contemporary literature and film, Bourrier argues that the pairing of the “weak” and “strong” man is a

uniquely Victorian trope that evolved in response to two interrelated but divergent trends: an increased emphasis on industry and physical health and the developing cult of the invalid. By attending to the disabled / able-bodied male dyad in the novels of Charlotte Yonge, Charles Kingsley, Dinah Mulock Craik, Thomas Hughes, George Eliot, Henry James, and others, she reveals how the spectacle of male suffering was often used to structure both narrative form and normative middle-class masculinity. She thus asserts that in the nineteenth century, the disabled male was not in fact marginalized; rather, he 'persisted as an alternative and complementary Victorian mode of masculinity' (3).

<2>Bourrier's argument essentially operates on two planes: firstly, she suggests that Victorian novels often contain weak/strong male pairings because of the supplementary function provided by disabled masculinities. According to her, the disabled or ill character serves to demonstrate the moral soundness of his heartier counterpart, whose silence sometimes casts doubt on his generosity of spirit, by, on the one hand, providing opportunities for the normative male to render him acts of kindness and, on the other hand, constructing the laconic hero's emotional depths through narration. She identifies a trajectory of this narrative dyad in Victorian fiction whereby it begins as a friendship (one structured by homoeroticism), as in the novels of Yonge, Kingsley, and Craik; transitions into a rivalry, as in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); and eventually collapses into a single figure — what might be termed the idle industrialist, best figured by James's Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Over the latter half of the century, then, the disabled male character moves from shoring up normative mid-century masculinity, to critiquing it, to revealing it to be outdated and in competition with 'a new mode of masculinity [that] privileges observation and consumption,' both material and medical (103). Whether friend, foe, or indifferent onlooker, the "weak" character consistently serves as the focalizer of the narrative, an observation that underpins the second component of Bourrier's argument—that, owing to the sensitivity and inactivity presumed to result from physical suffering, there is an inherent link between illness or disability and authorship. As she writes, 'it has come to seem natural that the position of the disabled man parallels the position of the author: both are marginal figures, primed by their suffering as marginal figures to observe, and both have the artistic temperament necessary to turn their observations to good aesthetic account' (136). According to Bourrier, for the Victorians, the emotional and sometimes physical pain of narration makes authorship a form of labor comparable to that of the capitalist.

<3>Bourrier positions her argument as 'flesh[ing] out some of the larger claims of the first monographs in disability studies' — specifically, those of Lennard Davis, Martha Stoddard Holmes, and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder — by exploring one way that disability functions as a trope in Victorian literature (16). Certainly, her treatment of affect and disability shares much in common with the work of Stoddard Holmes, whose *Fictions of Affliction* (2004) proposes that by engaging melodramatic conventions and depicting 'the feeling relationships that should exist between people on the basis of their corporeality,' Victorian authors naturalized the connection between disability and emotion.<sup>(2)</sup> But Bourrier's work seems more indebted to Mary Klages's *Woeful Afflictions* (1999), which analyzes how sentimentality (rather than melodrama) models what Klages alternately terms 'empathic selfhood' and 'empathic subjectivity' — a 'fundamentally embodied self,' but one whose 'significance . . . is inscribed through [its] ability to feel for (and act on behalf of) the weak or dependent or suffering.'<sup>(3)</sup> Given that Klages's

theory of empathic selfhood is quite similar to Bourrier's disabled masculinity — in both models, the disabled character functions as a device to elicit emotional responses from the able-bodied character in order to cultivate or demonstrate the latter's kindness — it is surprising that Klages's concept is never really mentioned. Regardless, in showing how the construction of normative masculinity depends on disability, Bourrier succeeds in highlighting one of the central tenets of disability studies: the interdependence of disability and ability in structures of signification. Indeed, she can be read as invoking Davis's concept of 'the hegemony of normalcy' — the notion that normalcy 'must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal'(4) — and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea of the 'normate,' that illusive and elusive figure whose boundaries must constantly be redrawn by its juxtaposition with deviant others.(5) Although Bourrier's close readings of the weak/strong male pairings in Victorian literature, informed by contemporary reviews and medical texts, successfully unpack how disabled and able-bodied masculinities reciprocally shaped each other's construction, I am not sure that they confirm her assertion that male disability functioned as a 'complementary Victorian mode of masculinity' (3). Instead, they seem to show disability to be subordinate to normative masculinity in domestic realist fiction, a pattern that invites — even demands — critique from a disability studies perspective.

<4>While she follows Stoddard Holmes and Klages in her consideration of the disabled body as a feeling body, another construction that merits problematizing, Bourrier charts new territory by joining disability studies with studies of invalidism and illness. Many Victorian monographs separate illness from disability, but Bourrier is right to point out that '[t]he Victorians would not have drawn such a sharp line between illness and what we now call "disabilities"' (16). In demonstrating how the Victorians approached disability and chronic illness as being on the same continuum of experience, she opens up previously unconsidered works to a disability studies perspective. It should be noted, though, that her argument does not encompass a broad range of disabilities but rather is specific to those that are "painful." This enables her to propose a direct link between disability and authorship, pain and productivity, and to suggest that 'masculine suffering [is] a precondition for writing' because of its potential to bring about 'emotional effusiveness' and moral growth (51). This is an interesting argument, but it raised a number of questions for me as a reader: First, what about disabilities that are not "painful" per se? How did the Victorians situate those experiences of physical difference in relation to normative mid-century masculinity? And how do other understandings of disability provide an impetus for narrative? If they do not, it seems like suffering more broadly, not disability specifically, lends itself to authorial production. Moreover, why is *masculine suffering*, and not female suffering, 'a precondition for writing' (51)? Particularly useful would have been a discussion of the differences between male and female experiences of disability and how they affect the narrative impulse. I am also curious about the broader implications of the link between authorship and disability/illness. For instance, is storytelling only worthwhile labor if it is associated with pain, whether personal or vicarious? Understandably, one book cannot pursue all these lines of inquiry, but I found the question as to why masculine (but seemingly not feminine) suffering is conducive to writing to be a crucial one.

<5>Ultimately, Bourrier's study makes an important contribution to the fields of literary disability studies and masculinity studies by effectively contextualizing Victorian treatments of male characters

with disabilities, revealing how ‘cultural notions of masculine weakness inflected norms of healthy, red-blooded manliness’ (14 -15). Additionally, by offering thoughtful analyses of the way that disability structures narrative, it delivers a compelling argument about the relationship between disability and textuality. In particular, I am fascinated by Bourrier’s claims about convalescence and narrative time — she suggests convalescence shapes the narrative by motivating its development (because of the weak man’s ‘restless energy’) and structuring its pacing (38) — and I would like to read more on this subject. I also found productive her positioning of disabled masculinity in relation to the economic realm. For instance, her reading of the disabled avuncular narrative position in *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) as presenting ‘an alternative set of economic and affective possibilities in the novel’ is especially insightful (71). Finally, *The Measure of Manliness* poses challenging questions about how anxieties regarding disability and gender shape narrative technique, questions that I hope a future work will explore further.

#### Endnotes

- (1) James Fitzjames Stephen, Review of *Guy Livingstone*, *Edinburgh Review* 108 (October 1858), 537, in Karen Bourrier, *The Measure of Manliness* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2015), 47. ([^](#))
- (2) Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2004), 31. ([^](#))
- (3) Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999), 6. ([^](#))
- (4) Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 44. ([^](#))
- (5) Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 8. ([^](#))