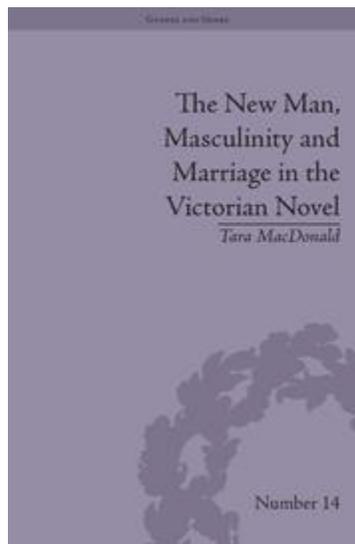


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Guest Edited by Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill



Remaking Victorian Men

[*The New Man: Masculinity and Marriage in the Victorian Novel*](#). Tara MacDonald. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015. 218 pp.

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<1>'We have heard a great deal lately about the New Woman,' ponders Grant Allen in 'The New Man' and in the first epigraph to Tara MacDonald's new monograph. 'Why so little about the New Man who must inevitably accompany her?' More has certainly been heard about the New Man in literary criticism and social history, at least, in recent years, although no work has outlined him at book length as effectively and knowledgeably as MacDonald does here.

<2>*The New Man* claims to be 'the first book on the late Victorian New Man' (1), but one of the volume's strengths is that its story begins in the high Victorian period, rather than the *fin-de-siècle* in

which so many discussions of the topic tend exclusively to cluster. MacDonald is especially good at estimating the significance of what might initially appear to be subplots or minor characters, and Tommy Traddles and Herbert Pocket emerge as the unlikely heroes of her reading of *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861). Following the lead of critics such as Holly Furneaux and historians such as John Tosh, MacDonald is attentive to the importance of masculine domesticity in the Victorian novel, and shows how the display of virtues like kindness and an aptitude for nurturing might make husbands such as these admirable, even attractive. For the reader marriage can feel like a failure and a success when it is the ending to the New Woman's story but MacDonald shrewdly assesses the ways in which 'the marriage plot is also that of the man' (5).

<3>*The New Man* is, understandably, very interested in how unhappy marriages are figured in the nineteenth-century novel, and the second chapter turns to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and to *Adam Bede* (1859), which see their heroes emasculated by feelings of rejection and powerlessness. MacDonald deals squarely with the apparently unsatisfactory nature of the former novel's ending, and, given her stress throughout on the importance of men as carers, this novel's portrayal of domestic abuse appears here especially vivid. The union between Esther and Frederick Lawrence is made as important as *The Tenant's* central triad, and Seth Bede too is given sustained attention, his unconventional ending persuasively argued to be a happy one.

<4>Marriage is not only an act of love (or convenience) but also an institution; so too are medicine and the press. Late Victorian representations of the New Man in novels such *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), *The Beth Book* (1897), and *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897) engaged with issues of vocation and professionalization, tracing their impact on both male and female characters. *The New Man's* context for its central subject is not men amongst other men, but men among women, who in the plots of these books are not simply marrying (or not marrying) each other, but going to work alongside one another too. 'Grand and Dixon,' it is adumbrated, 'demonstrate that the New Man cannot simply be the romantic partner to the New Woman but must be her political ally in the public sphere as well' (81-2). Evolutionary and eugenic frameworks, and issues of racial purity, even superiority, also come into play later in the century, often dramatized as a concern less around female virginity than for male sexual continence. The texts here are intelligently illuminated by their reading alongside journalistic interventions such as Grand's 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question,' which iconoclastically berates the late-Victorian New Man for now having become too effeminate.

<5>MacDonald notes that authors of New Woman novels were offering an interpretation not only of Victorian society but also Victorian literature, and shrewdly frames the men of these texts as reworking earlier models (her chosen term) of masculinity. George Gissing's novels often figure the New Man through distributing a range of strong and weak masculine traits across a number of contrasting characters; a section (which, in the interests of disclosure — has previously appeared in a volume co-edited by this reviewer) on *The Odd Women* (1893) dramatizes 'a clash between early and late Victorian values' (119). The narrative arc of the latter part of this volume shows the remaking of late-Victorian masculinity not as a polarized unitary ideal but as a range of orientations, and male characters struggling to align themselves successfully and coherently across them. *The New Man*, like so many Victorian novels, ends at the Empire. Olive Schreiner's colonial New Men endeavor to find a place for compassion

within their identity as Empire-builders, the importance of which is strongly iterated by Schreiner. Gregory Rose performs the New Woman in improbable drag in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and the title character of *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) turns from an imperial directive towards an explicitly Christian mission.

<6>The conclusion sees not only gender, but also racial norms being shockingly affronted in the miscegenation and infanticide of Victoria Cross's *Anna Lombard* (1901), not a novel with which I was previously familiar, but one to which many readers of *The New Man* will immediately turn. Schreiner began what was to be her definitive treatment of the subject, *From Man to Man* (1926), in the 1880s but, tellingly, was never able to finish it over the next forty years of her life, as if the New Man had not yet been made to the Woman's entire satisfaction. When I teach 'New Woman' novels, I implore my students, most of whom are, as is common in literature programs, female, not to patronize the Victorians: what these heroines want is a successful career, romantic and erotic fulfillment and, often, children as well: how many of our students, over a hundred years later, can still be confident of having it all?

<7>*The New Man* is fluently and engagingly written, and like all Pickering and Chatto books, handsomely made (although this publisher's irritating habit of prohibiting in-text references needlessly inflates the length of the notes and thus, presumably, the production cost). For the price of \$150 too, it might have been advantageous to see cartoons from *Punch* reproduced rather than described. MacDonald has mastered not only her range of thoughtfully chosen primary material but also the attendant scholarship; as with many books borne from PhD theses, the tone towards previous arguments can sometimes seem over-respectful where a little more briskness might have been beneficial, as in her quite-right rebuttal of Elaine Showalter's historical dismissal of the merit of many of the texts considered. The arguments are informed throughout by detailed close reading (which very occasionally gives an impression of over-adherence to the rehearsal of plot details). Most refreshing of all is MacDonald's freedom from cliché, particularly in her questioning of how fin-de-siècle masculinity can be claimed, as it so often is, to be in 'crisis' when it is almost always simultaneously everywhere in power.