What Does Man Want? The Recent Debates on Manhood and Masculinities

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Masculinities—A New Phenomenon?

In contemporary culture—and in contemporary American culture, in particular—interrogations of manhood and masculinity abound, and so do male bodies on display. The list of publications on the subject has been increasing rapidly during the last decade, including such titles as *Little Big Men, Taking It Like a Man, Men Medium Rare,* and *Communists, Cowboys and Queers.* While new shelves have been installed in bookstores, generating a whole new market, this novel interest in men has by no means been a merely academic or scholarly endeavor. American museums of the smaller and larger scale have taken to the subject; the 1994-95 exhibit “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art” at the Whitney Museum of Modern Art is only one of the more prominent and controversial projects among many others. Likewise, popular culture presents masculinity from new angles. The rise of boy groups and “boyly” styles comes to mind as well as movies like Quentin Tarrantino’s *Pulp Fiction,* which parody and compromise images of manhood in many ways. Advertisements project and enlarge highly eroticized male bodies, exposing increasing amounts of skin to make men and women purchase new beauty products or the good old pair of blue jeans. Following Robert Bly’s drum beats.

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4 On the subject, see, for instance, the special issue “New Masculinities” of *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal on Film and Television* 38 (Fall 1996): 1-72.

5 Robert Bly, poet and author of the bestseller *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1990), is the self-appointed ‘father’ of the new men’s movement. Cf. Susan Faludi,
men’s gatherings, “exploring traditional and changing views of masculinity,”6 have become popular among the economically better-off. Partly provoked by the discussion about the absence of father figures in American families, father-son relationships are a recurring issue, especially in the prose by African-American men.7 And while American politics has readdressed the ban on gays in the military, market economy discovers homosexuals as a financially potent target group. At the same time, though, American society witnesses the emergence of men’s rights activist groups and “angry white men,” agitating against their supposed discrimination on radio talk shows. Men’s issues and masculinities are everywhere, so it seems.

What else is new? some may wonder. Men have always taken center stage, and both men and women have continuously written about men, men’s accomplishments, men’s ideas, men’s philosophies, men’s this and that. So what is the difference? Well, there is a difference indeed: Manhood, as displayed and negotiated in contemporary culture and cultural criticism, has ceased to refer to a universal, though unmarked and concealed state of being. Nor is masculinity, as feminism has insisted for a long time, a supposedly stable and homogeneous entity identical with power and patriarchal dominance. Manhood and masculinity are meanwhile acknowledged as a set of myths and constructions, fraught with their own history as well as with contradictions, desires, and anxieties. No longer conceived of as a source of knowledge, Antony Easthope argues, manhood has turned out to be its effect.8 As such, masculinity has become a problem—a problem, however, not only for women, but for men themselves. Men, we are told, are “in crisis,” or, as Ronald Levant puts it (too) optimistically, “at the turning point”;9 manhood, John Stoltenberg claims, is even at its “end.”10 Or as Richard A. Shweder writes in a recent review of “men’s crisis literature”: “...in a post-modern world lacking clear-cut borders and distinctions, it has become hard to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one.”11

For scholars of American studies—a discipline concerned with a culture that created a particularly perspicuous iconography of the masculine, featuring cowboys, su-

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7 “Massachusetts Men’s Gathering,” advertisement.
8 See, for example, John Edgar Wideman, Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

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The Recent Debates on Manhood and Masculinities

Of course, the current proliferation of a discourse on manhood, masculinities, and male identity, the emergence of gay studies, men’s studies, and queer theory14 as well as the institutional politics that accompany such tendencies in (academic) culture did not occur as suddenly as it may seem sometimes. Much of what appears as a novel trend now originated in the late sixties and seventies, in the context of gay studies as well as in response to an earlier feminist theory and practice15 (which have also triggered the “feminist backlash”16 of so-called men’s rights groups). Focused on distinctions of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, late 1970s and early 80s analyses of manhood, however, tended to, first, foreground sociological and historical dimensions and to be descriptive of male gender roles and social functions.17 Secondly, as

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14 In the following, we will use the term “masculinity studies” when talking about all these diverse perspectives in general.
15 Throughout men’s studies, it is a commonplace—if not a ritual—to acknowledge the positive impact feminism and the women’s movement have had on the author’s own (personal and professional) development and work. Some authors, such as John Stoltenberg, for instance, identify with the cause of radical feminism, as advocated by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, to an extent that equivocates their own position. Cf., for instance, Stoltenberg, Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice (New York: Penguin, 1989).
16 On this issue, cf. Falludi, Backlash.
goes for gay studies in particular, they were governed by a specific identity politics, triggered in part by the actual politics from Stonewall to anti-AIDS campaigns and the activism of Queer Nation. 18 The 1980s, in contrast, saw the rise of research exploring the multiple “differences within” manhood from new theoretical angles. Furthermore, encouraged in part by the preoccupation of gay studies and gay culture with male sexualities, we have witnessed an increasing preoccupation with the male body. 19

The current emphasis on the diversity and complexity of masculinities, on the constructedness and performative moments of manhood, and on relations “between men” 20 mainly results from the crucial impact that poststructuralist theory and deconstruction have had on the development of gender studies. The emergence of gender as a category of critical analysis is itself closely aligned with the rise of gender studies from earlier women’s studies and feminist criticism. 21 While gender, as first defined by feminist criticism and women’s studies, referred to the biological difference of the sexes, that is, to sexual difference, gender studies concentrates on the systematic and systemic cultural constructedness of that difference. Accordingly, the subject of gender has changed considerably.

Studies focusing on sexual difference have advanced a critical perspective geared, on the one hand, to exposing patriarchal practices and, on the other hand, to exploring women’s experiences, lives, and work, their cultural aesthetics and history in their apparent separateness from ‘official’ and dominant male culture and identity. Meant to correct and complement prior ‘reductive’ views of culture and history, such analyses have privileged female difference and further promoted the theoretical concept of difference. Gender studies, by contrast, redefined gender as a relational term, as gender identity or gender relations. Here gender no longer refers to a biological binarism, but is conceived of as a multi-dimensional political, social, and cultural construct. If Simone de Beauvoir maintained that woman is not born, but made a woman, gender critics now claim the same for men, as well. Accordingly, the hierarchies of men’s and women’s subject positions are no longer seen as effects of male and female bodies, but rather of the cultural significance, the specified social roles, cultural functions, and fictions of femininity and masculinity these bodies have been assigned. Gender has ceased to be an ontological category and, as Teresa de Lauretis puts it with reference to Foucault, has turned into a “‘set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations,’ . . . by the deployment of a ‘complex political technology’.” 22 It is (a) representation, and the representation of gender—be it in laws, cinematic texts, or common daily routines—is also its construction. In turn, the deconstruction of gender relations and patterns by marginal cultural practices at the same time serves its reconstruction. 23 Accordingly, gender identity and relations are understood to be unstable and variable, processes, not essences. The insistence on this mutability constitutes the political impact of gender studies, a potential that those who are critical of gender analyses frequently deny or underestimate.

One of the most significant effects of this shift in the conception of gender was the irritation, if not deconstruction, of the very binarism between nature and culture itself. 24 The insight that, on the one hand, the sexual body is itself culturally engendered, while, on the other hand, the reality of physical experience cannot be denied, has raised far-reaching questions concerning the interrelation of body and discourse. The most significant answers have been produced by Judith Butler, whose conception of gender performativity has given the debate yet another twist whose impact not only affected gender studies but became highly significant for queer theory, as well. 25 Butler’s notion of gender identity as a performative act is not meant to suggest, though, that gender can be put on and taken off like a costume. Rather, such a focus on theatricality foregrounds the fact that gender does not fall on the side of either nature or culture, but is constituted by their relation. Like de Lauretis, Butler defines gender as an effect of power structures and discursive practices—practices which are not imposed upon a supposedly natural, authentic body, but create that body through its very projections of nature and authenticity.

Due to this interdependence of nature and culture, gender studies frequently speaks of a sex/gender system 26 which positions men and women and exposes male and female corporeality in rather distinct manners. The cultural construction of femininity as body/other and masculinity as mind/self has significantly reduced men’s position in the processes of reproduction, a tendency which itself reinforced the absence of the male sexual body within the symbolic order. Recent interrogations of masculin-

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18 On “the gay liberation decades” see, for example, Neil Miller, Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1800 to the Present (New York: Vintage, 1995) 363-479.

19 This emphasis also triggered the rise of ‘new’ categories of masculinity such as age. On the issue of age and the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette, including her essay “All Together Now: The New Sexual Politics of Midlife Bodies,” The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994) 221-47.

20 The work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, which delineates and theorizes the cultural demarcation of heterosexuality, homosociality, homosexuality, and nonhomophobia, has been crucial in this area. See especially Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literatures and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) and The Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley U of California P, 1990); for the discussion of these relations “between men” in the context of literary history cf. among others, David Leverenz, Manhood and the American Renaissance (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989).


23 De Lauretis 2-3.

24 The most significant early exploration of this binarism in the context of feminist criticism remains Sherry Ortner’s essay “Is Female to Male As Nature Is to Culture?” Feminist Studies 1 (1975): 5-31.


From Men in/and Feminism to Masculinity Studies

In the fields of literary and cultural studies, one significant initial question was how men positioned themselves in, or in relation to, feminism. The dilemma those male critics faced who were sympathetic to feminism was that an emancipatory discourse they wanted to participate in conceived of men, seen as a collective singular subject, as agents of oppressive power. Men in Feminism (1987), a crucial collection of essays edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, can be taken as symptomatic of this early theoretical discussion. In the opening essay, Stephen Heath defines the relation of men to feminism as an “impossible” one. Claiming that “his experience is her oppression” (2), he declares that even men who want to break out of traditional gender hierarchies could not eradicate this structure as “it is not personal, it is social” (10). Paul Smith qualifies Heath’s position by adding that, while the critical paradigms of feminist theory could be appropriated, its political and existential dimensions cannot be re-experienced. Accordingly, Jardine remarks, male feminist writing does not show “struggle” and “pain.” While Smith holds that for men in feminism “it is impossible to say anything properly correct,” Heath’s advice is to “read,” “learn silence,” and show “admiration” (29) for feminist efforts. However, both positions exemplify that, as Jardine suspects, the phenomenon of men in feminism runs the risk of being merely a “Bandwagon Effect” (57), an appropriation of a critical and, crucially, the latest emancipatory paradigm. This suspicion, in turn, implies that at this moment in the discussion manhood was still understood as a unitary concept and the governing difference remained that of ‘male’ versus ‘female.’

The main problem, then, was what position men could take in a field called “male feminism” which, after all, is a contradiction in terms. If men wanted to engage in a more general “feminist” project, they would have to turn the critical gaze on them- selves and most particularly their sexual bodies. After all, as Jardine contends, “[i]t is much easier to speak about women than to speak as a body-coded male” (60). At this point, the male body—as opposed to the female body—has remained under-theorized. According to Heath, who accepts psychoanalysis as the governing theory to conceptualize sexuality, such an analysis would only repeat “the eternal problem of the phallos” (26). As it presupposes sexual difference, however, psychoanalysis poses severe problems for any attempt to rethink gender and, therefore, itself needs to be historicized. Likewise, formations of gender positions have to be studied in their specific historical and cultural contexts.

In the collection entitled Engendering Men, an explicit response to Men in Feminism, Joseph Boone critiques Heath’s overall perspective as “literally and figuratively arresting.” While its subtitle advertises Engendering Men as male feminist criticism, the editors Boone and Cadden want to dissolve the hierarchy between “female ‘natives’ and male ‘colonists’” maintained, for example, in the collection by Jardine and Smith. The debate about male feminism, they claim, reduces the multiple sites occupied by “actual men” to a notion of “man,” which neglects “marginalized male voices” in particular. Redirecting the critical gaze from gender difference to differences within men, many essays in the volume focus on gay men’s perspectives in particular, as they are deemed to experience the consequences of restrictive notions of unitary masculinity more directly. Positioned as the internal other within manhood, gay men, it is assumed, could at the same time perceive and conceptualize mechanisms of the construction of that supposedly unitary masculinity. Accordingly, introducing a “community of male critics” (7), Boone and Cadden point out that many of the contributors “find a model for their practice in the . . . field of gay studies” (4). Inquiries in this field use strategies of emancipatory discourses to critique the oppressive effects of hegemonic constructions of masculinity from within the white, middle-class men’s position.

Thus, while feminism explored and privileged female difference before de-essentializing that difference in reaction to critiques by, for example, black and lesbian women, masculinity studies had to start out by de-essentializing maleness. The main task was to show that manhood was heterogeneous. Accordingly, the essays in Engendering Men explore the ways in which different forms of masculinity shaped literary and other cultural texts, analyze “images of ‘manliness’” (4), and “focus on the anxieties of gender occasioned in specifically male . . . writers” (4). They explore the gendered grounding of the institution of literary criticism, look at the ways men are socialized

30 Alice Jardine, “Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?” Men in Feminism, ed. Jardine and Smith 54-61; 58.
32 The paradigmatic proposition is Hélène Cixous’s claim that “[m]en still have to say everything about their own sexuality” (qtd. in Jardine, “Men in Feminism” 60).
33 Among recent explorations of the male body, we want to single out, for its originality, Paul Smith, “Vas,” Camera Obscura 17 (1988): 89-112, and, for its range, The Male Body, ed. Goldstein.
36 Boone, “Of Me(n) and Feminism” 22.
in patriarchal societies, use a specifically gay perspective to reinterpret texts, and also reread women's writing in a way that makes explicit what it means to read as/like a man. In contrast to Men in Feminism, male subject positions are thus reflected in respect to both the critics' own situatedness and to the male desires and anxieties that constitute the subtexts of concrete literary and cultural artifacts.

Differences within Masculinity

The insistence on the differences within manhood has been, in our view, the decisive effect of the predominance of gay perspectives within masculinity studies. At the same time, these perspectives have also tended to reduce the differences between men to the demarcation between homo/heterosexuality, thus supporting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim that the

homo/hetero-sexual definition has been a presiding master term of the past century . . . [and] has affected our culture through its ineffaceable marking particularly of the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonical/noncanonical, wholeness/decadence, urbanc/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different, active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntariness/addiction.37

If, however, masculinity studies should affect and ultimately transform gender relations—which we think it should—it has to be transposed into the context of relations between men and women. Only then is it possible to rethink these relations as governed by distinctions other than the male/female binarism. One such distinction which cuts across the traditionally governing difference of male and female and at the same time allows to rethink the male body is the polarity of active and passive; another is that of rational and emotional.

Analyzing the ways established conceptions of the male body structure the hierarchical asymmetry between men and women, Susan Bordo shows that gender differences crucially hinge on the ascription of attributes such as active and passive, strong and weak, hard and soft to men and women respectively.38 The exclusive association of activity, strength, and hardness with the male body constitutes the material grounding of the gender distinction. As a result of the gradual reassessment of gender roles, however, the active/passive dichotomy has been severed from gender positions and linked more directly with particular social functions.39

At the same time, the men's movement of the last decade has attempted to redefine manhood by exploring the whole spectrum of men's emotions, including an economics

of feelings beyond anger and aggression. Socialized in ways that force them to repress certain sensibilities, some men themselves feel oppressed by the patriarchal system. Likewise, while emotion has become a crucial category in philosophy, artificial intelligence, and sociology, due to the governing "oppression/power" paradigm, it has for a long time been "neglected within both gender and literary and cultural studies,"40 which only recently have begun to tackle the issue. Significantly enough, the emotional aspects of men's experience have in turn been crucial moments for gay perspectives. For us, this dimension of masculinity studies seems particularly promising because it cuts across all kinds of dichotomies, including those of male/female, hetero/homosexual as well as mind/body.

It needs to be mentioned, though, that emotion and sensitivity have usually been projected onto racially and ethnically other men, symbolically feminizing and disempowering them in the process. These racial and ethnic others, however, do not have a strong presence in either of the essay collections we have discussed above.41 Indeed, both tend to neglect the fact that masculinity and femininity have always been overdetermined by race, ethnicity, class, and age—to mention only the most conspicuous factors—and constructed by a network of multiple, overlapping, and interrelated distinctions. African-American men, for instance, have been conceived as both hypermasculine and as emasculated, that is, reduced, as Robyn Wiegman puts it, to "extreme corporeality,"42 a projection which has served racialist discourse to discriminate and disempower African-American men. As a result, analyses of black masculinity have been predominantly historical, or, more recently, have focused on phenomena of popular culture,43 while racialized masculinity has remained undertheorized.44 The insistence on the historicity of the construction of black manhood in turn points to a deficit within masculinity studies grounded in poststructuralist theory and deconstruction. Our claim is that poststructuralist and deconstructivist strategies enable critics to analyze the construction of gender and masculinity and, hence, to show how hierarchichal binaries can be or are being deconstructed, yet that they frequently fail to account

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37 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet 11.
for change. At the same time, deconstructions of differences themselves involve reconstructions and a redrawing of boundaries. They are themselves moments of historical change.45

Binarisms which can be dissolved on a synchronic level, then, have to be investigated diachronically because the function of any distinction depends upon its specific social and historical context. One highly persuasive example of a study that captures both the dissolution and redrawing of (gender) boundaries is Thomas Laqueur’s Making Sex (1990). As Laqueur convincingly shows, the paradigm change from the “one-sex model” to the “two-sex model” occurred precisely at the historical moment when fundamental epistemological, social, political, and economic changes produced a cultural climate which made the biological differences between the sexes recognizable, transforming basic notions about gender in the process.46 Analogously, recent changes of gender concepts need to be understood in the framework of the evolution of modern societies whose functional differentiation encompasses the dissociation of the active/passive dichotomy from gender positions. While these societies have increasingly severed social functions from social status, gender has remained one of the few fixed, supposedly “biologically” pregiven, and thus seemingly unalterable, positions. For a globalized market economy to function smoothly, though, people need to assume diverse roles and to frequently shift positions—a requirement to which stable gender positions are obviously a hindrance after all. The dissociation of gender-specific ascriptions to specific gendered bodies, epitomized more recently by Butler’s concept of gender performativity, therefore, liberates neither men nor women from political and economic hierarchies. Instead, gender politics are both emancipatory and supporting the internal dynamics and economy of modern social systems. And so are readings that engender manhood.

Reading Masculinity

There are mainly three levels on which the insights of masculinity studies have affected literary and cultural criticism. First, as we have discussed on the preceding pages, masculinity studies have problematized the position of the male critic and the institutions of literary criticism. Secondly, they have shifted the focus within concrete analyses of literary and cultural discourse and generated readings such as those we present here. And thirdly, they have added novel perspectives on the making of literary and cultural history.

F. O. Matthiessen’s well-known sense of the American Renaissance, for instance, exemplifies how gendered constructions of literary and cultural history manage to engage in national politics. In fact, instituting an American canon purged of the supposedly effeminate and European,47 Matthiessen’s remasculinization of the American literary tradition participated significantly in the formation of national identity. Constructions of literary and cultural history, though, are not only gendered in terms of the selection of texts. Conceptions of genres and literary periods also establish differences by use of a gendered vocabulary which frequently relies on the dichotomies of active/passive, strong/weak, etc. The distinction prosody makes between feminine and masculine line endings is only one of the most evident instances of such engendering. As Winfried Fluck points out, the twentieth-century redefinition of American realism “favors words like tough, hard, and hard-hitting” as well as anti-social perspectives, partly in order to “compensate for” the increasing “marginality” of the institutions of literature and literary criticism—and, more generally, the loss of authority of the humanities—“by the symbolic construction of strength.”48 Likewise, Andreas Huyssen argues that modernism and the historical avant-garde have consistently constituted themselves in opposition to an emerging mass culture which since the nineteenth century was construed as feminine, “associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of man.”49

Concerned with literary texts from the American Renaissance and modernism as well as with contemporary poetry, drama, and phenomena of popular culture including spectator sports and film, the following essays interrogate—explicitly as well as implicitly—such engendering of American literary and cultural history. Both the essays of Jochen Achilles and Heinz Ickstadt deal with formative periods of American cultural history and demonstrate that the cultural work of literary texts can be productively reassessed by looking at the ways in which they interrogate masculinity. Achilles, in his essay “Purgers and Montaged Men: Masculinity and Identity in the Fiction of Hawthorne and Poe,” discussing fictions of the early Republic, distinguishes between unitary and heterogeneous, polyvalent forms of masculinity. Literary projections of a unitary version of manhood, Achilles claims, draw a clear line between masculine self-fashioning and “a feminized American composite order.” Dramatizations of a heterogeneous masculinity, by contrast, project what he calls “montaged” men. Both take constructions of masculinity as a symbolic testing ground for conflicts between self and other as well as for national identity formation. Constructions of masculinity in fictions of the early Republic therefore mediate individual and cultural identity.

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45 Renate Hof argues that debates about gender will have to acknowledge that drawing distinctions is inevitable when designating fields of knowledge. Referring to George Spencer Brown’s basic rule “Draw a distinction!” she concludes that the “simultaneity of observation, distinguishing, and naming are necessary for every form of knowing.” Consequently, boundaries can be changed, yet never be dissolved, only relocated (Renate Hof, “Gender and Difference: Paradoxieprobleme des Unterscheidens,” Amerikastudien / American Studies 37.3 [1992]: 437-49; 439, our translation).


The turn of the twentieth century is a particularly crucial moment in cultural change at which gender roles are being redefined. Focusing on the ways in which processes of modernization are negotiated as well as performed in literature, Ickstadt, in his essay “Liberated Women—Reconstructed Men: Symptoms of Cultural Crisis at the Turn of the Century,” distinguishes two discourses of modernism. The fiction of realism and naturalism responds directly to the dissolution of a traditional cultural order and, as a result, is divided against itself by a simultaneous yearning for hierarchy and the wish to dissolve boundaries. Modernism proper, by contrast, translates cultural categories into textual ones. Its open texts blur gender boundaries and create a textual fluidity, which, as is demonstrated in an analysis of Stein’s Tender Buttons, encompasses both masculinity and femininity. In modernist texts, therefore, it is textuality itself which is the medium of the deconstruction and reconstruction of gender roles.

In her paper “The Naked Truth: Mickey Spillane and the Masculinity Crises of the Fifties,” Gabriele Dietze analyzes hard-boiled detective novels as a means of negotiating gender configurations dominant in the 1950s—configurations framed, on the one hand, by the realm of domesticity and the family, and, on the other, aggressive sexual identity. Constantly confronted with femmes fatales attempting to lure him away from the path of justice, Mike Hammer engages in violent actions against women which are read as symptoms of male anxieties pertaining to both domestic containment and sexually challenging independent women. As Dietze inverts Laura Mulvey’s 1970s thesis about the fetishistic nature of the male gaze in the cinema, she claims that the compulsive undressing of women in these texts serves to reassure a supposedly threatened male identity by exposing woman’s lack of a phallus. “[T]he urban detective establishes virility,” Dietze concludes, “by adoring . . . and destroying the female body of evidence.”

In her essay “Gods and Heroes Revised: Mythological Concepts of Masculinity in Contemporary Poetry,” Christa Buschendorf reads “the function of revisionary mythmaking” in three long poems by H. D., Anne Waldman, and Diane Wakoski as a strategy to reconfigure masculinity from within classical myths. Gender images perpetuated in myths throughout Western history are reconstructed in these poems by juxtaposing them with representations of the poets’ contemporary female experience. Formally, this revision consists in a double approach of creating multiple and contradictory male voices as well as dissolving strict boundaries between male and female, thus in producing a dialogical and heterogeneous field of complementary as well as flexible voices “beyond gender.” It is, first of all, poetic technique, as Buschendorf shows, which refashions masculinity in these lyric texts.

Both Christoph Irmscher, in his essay “The Absolute Power of a Man: Staging Masculinity in Giacomo Puccini and David Henry Hwang,” and Eva Boesenberg, in her contribution “Who’s Afraid of Shaq Attaq? Constructions of Black Masculinity and the NBA,” focus upon ethnic, respectively racial, differences within masculinity, though they do so from distinct perspectives. Based on an analysis of David Henry Hwang’s play M. Butterfly (1988), Irmscher’s argument explores the ways in which the literary text, figuring upon its musical pretext, dramatizes masculinity not simply in the context of an intercultural clash of East and West, but defines it as a matter of authority in the sense of authorship. As Hwang’s text figures upon and rewrites Puccini’s opera exploring the love relationship between the diplomat Gallimard and his (supposedly female) lover who turns out to be a man, manhood is eventually revealed to be an unauthorized cultural script. Boesenberg, by contrast, shows how the diverse strategies of self-fashioning practised by the African-American basketball stars Shaquille O’Neal, Michael Jordan, and Dennis Rodman play upon and, at the same time, call into question culturally dominant projections of black masculinity by which they are necessarily circumscribed. In this way, the author exposes the extreme difficulties as well as the possibilities which a previously marginalized—in fact, criminalized—group faces in its attempt to reconstruct racialized manhood, especially when doing so in a highly commodified cultural domain.

The final two essays discuss cinematic texts. In her essay “‘I got them all’: (De-)Constructing Masculinity through Violence in Sam Peckinpah’s Straw Dogs,” Isa Oster tag analyzes the ways in which the movie transforms its hero by having him embrace an identity based on the Western genre’s traditional conception of violent masculinity. Such a reconstruction of manhood is both negotiated by the hero’s confrontation with the male community of an English village and mediated in crucial ways through his wife. Examining the film’s formal devices, Oster tag shows that the film’s “visual turbulence” deconstructs the American myth of a “regeneration through violence,” thereby disturbing processes of identification. In this way, the author claims, Straw Dogs analyzes and undermines, rather than celebrates, a “patriarchal and violent society.”

Patrick Schuckmann finally, in his essay “Erotic Masculinity, the Male Spectator and the Heteroerotic Gaze,” explores the homoerotic subtext foregrounded in the cinematic texts of 1980s and 90s action movies. Approaching the issue through novel perspectives on the male gaze, the author shows that on a local level the demarcation between homosociality, heteroeroticism, and homosexuality tends to be dissolved, allowing for a multitude of relations between men and reconstructions of the male gaze. At the same time, though, such cultural and theoretical reconceptualizations continue to rely upon conventional images of a primarily physically defined manhood as well as on a marginalization of female characters. Their celebratory attitude, however, “coincides,” as Schuckmann concludes, “with the troubling realization that at the bottom of the cultural ideal of masculinity lurks a devastating emptiness.”

Man as yet another “sex which is not one”50? This is at least what close readings of representations of masculinities seem to suggest. They also suggest, though, that this lack of substance beyond the cultural ideals of masculinity (as well as femininity) identity is not so devastating after all. For the very absence of unidimensional, essential gender differences allows culture to constantly re-engender manhood (as well as womanhood), keeping in motion a process in which we all participate and whose scope, as we hope to show here, reaches well beyond the local level of a politics and politics of gender.