THE NEW MAN, MASCULINITY AND MARRIAGE IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

By Tara MacDonald
Reviewed by Jacob Jewusiak on 2015-06-14.
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In the 1990s, James Eli Adams's Dandies and Desert Saints (1995), Herbert Sussman's Victorian Masculinities (1995), and John Tosh's A Man's Place (1999) revealed that in Victorian England, the monolith of white male dominance had multiple instantiations. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars, these critics showed that masculinity was not an essential part of being a man, but rather a style or performance composed of many different social, cultural, and literary practices. For example, the old model of aristocratic masculinity, privileging rank and refinement, was joined in the nineteenth century by the middle-class emphasis on self-discipline and control. As the century progressed, specific roles or styles emerged, ranging from the venerable Victorian sage to the transgressive dandy.

Working within the paradigm set by previous critics, Tara MacDonald highlights a specific style of masculinity that emerged during the English fin de siècle: the New Man. Though he embodies compassion, healing, and gentleness—traits that diverge from the competitiveness and possessiveness of normative masculinity—the New Man is "best understood," writes MacDonald, "as the political ally to the New Woman" (1). Shedding light on this little discussed figure, MacDonald shows how a newly created type of male subjectivity struggled to express itself during the nineteenth century.

Many discussions of Victorian masculinity invoke the rhetoric of "crisis." According to Phillip Mallett, for instance, "Victorian Manhood was by definition a state of permanent crisis, a site of anxiety and contradiction as much as a source of power" (The Victorian Novel and Masculinity [2015]: vii). By contrast, MacDonald explains Victorian masculinity in terms of "negotiation," which helps her recover the significance of "typically unsuccessful or periphery figures" (MacDonald 3): figures who may fade into the background of the New Woman's quest narrative or retreat to a comfortable marriage with an "angel in the house." According to MacDonald, these fading examples of the compassionate model of masculinity tend to be slighted by critics. In David Copperfield (1850), for instance, she says they find Tom Traddles's "softness" less "fascinating" than the deviancies of Uriah Heep and Steerforth (42-43). While possibly true, however, this provocative point prompts us to ask if the reader's investment in certain characters is itself a product of a gendered system of value. Why have compassionate men drawn so little interest? Though MacDonald probes the significance of minor characters, narrative interest, and the marriage plot, her study of the New Man raises the outlines of an argument about gender and narrative that does not fully gel.

MacDonald historicizes her argument by citing events that
crucially helped to inform both the New Woman and the New Man: the legal rights of married women and the Matrimonial Causes Act, the problem of domestic abuse and cruelty toward women, and the social purist movement and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. By examining—in light of these events—a succession of characters that either do or do not exhibit qualities of the New Man, MacDonald illustrates the spectrum of New Man-masculinity from its prototype in the mid-nineteenth century to its emergence as a coherent identity at the century’s end. The New Man, MacDonald shows, either fails to live up to his own feminist ideals about companionate marriage or serves as a utopian possibility for the future.

Paradoxically, the more successful New Men are often relegated to the margins of the texts in which they appear. In George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), for instance, MacDonald notes that Seth Bede is not only treated by the narrator and other characters with a “mixture of condescension and generosity,” but also exemplifies a benevolent model of masculinity that borders on masochism (78). In encouraging Adam’s courtship with Dinah and eventually living with them as "Uncle Seth," he challenges the assumption commonly made by critics: that “ideal manliness in Western culture” is “unimaginable without sexual desire” (79).

In the first two chapters MacDonald tries to show how Charles Dickens, Anne Brontë, and George Eliot imagine a prototype of the New Man. In *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* (1861), she argues, characters like Tom Traddles and Herbert Pocket serve as a model for David Copperfield and Pip, respectively, by exemplifying a masculinity that is “opposed to competition and violence and relies instead of compassion” (29). But these novels also show how hard it is for the protagonist to reconcile manliness with compassion when—as in *Great Expectations*—the path to gentlemanliness is at “odds with a demanding market economy” (54). Nevertheless, MacDonald argues, the heterosexual couples of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and *Adam Bede* set “up models for the future” and herald “future forms of domesticity” (57). Instead of framing these novels as narratives of failed female vocation, MacDonald asks us to reconsider them as representations of healing masculinity. Both novels, she says, anticipate the emergence of the New Man, though the masculine figure they construct is utopian and “only partially realized” (67). For MacDonald, then, these stories of nascent New Manhood signify not failure but rather the beginnings of success in the cultural work that would legitimize reparative masculinity.

From the novels of Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot, Macdonald turns to fictional treatments of the New Woman and New Man during the *fin de siècle*. Having sought to show, in other words, how the novelists of the 1850s tested the prototype of the New Man, she argues that he actually emerged in the fiction of the 1890s. Though MacDonald will eventually analyze Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), one wonders how the years between 1860 and 1890 helped to incubate the New Man.

Eliding this question in chapter three, MacDonald probes two examples of New Woman fiction from the *fin de siècle*: Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) and Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* (1897). The male characters in these novels, she argues, obstruct not only the New Woman but also “a future in which the New Woman and New Man may unite in human solidarity” (81). Against this prospect, the novels are said to show how culturally important masculine figures—the doctor, the dandy, and the politician—fail to meet the expectations of the New Woman. Instead, MacDonald writes, the male artist uniquely employs his outsider position to reflect on “Victorian gender codes and social mores” (85). On the other hand, MacDonald also shows how the masculine care practiced by the prototypical New Men of the mid-century novels becomes professional doctoring in the later fiction: doctoring linked, ironically, to “social disease and patriarchal power” (82). Also, MacDonald notes, while Dixon's novel leaves the marriage
plots of Eliot and Brontë behind, it fails to find a way of filling the social and affective gap (94). Yet in contrast to Dixon's scapegoating of male characters, MacDonald writes, Grand's novel shows that women can rehabilitate men, create the New Man, and reconcile the romance narrative with the feminist quest plot.

This possibility for mutual understanding between men and women is contested, MacDonald finds, in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and Grant Allen's *The Typewriter Girl* (1897), which reveal a late nineteenth-century nostalgia for the conventions of normative masculinity: men are "torn between desires for conventional masculine and marriage models, on the one hand, and utopian models of equal and dynamic partnerships, on the other" (110). Furthermore, MacDonald observes, Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonland* (1897) explore the complex relationship between masculinity and empire. In the earlier novel, we are told, Waldo proves himself a New Man partly by rejecting "capitalist, colonial masculinity" (142). Both novels illustrate the difficult task of imagining new models of masculinity within a colonial framework that privileges the rapacious and competitive instincts of normative masculinity.

MacDonald concludes with readings of Victoria Cross's *Anna Lombard* (1901) and Schreiner's *From Man to Man* (1926). Besides the definitely post-Victorian date of Schreiner's novel, these two readings--however interesting--do not seem to buttress MacDonald's thesis as strongly as her analyses of earlier novels do. Given the number of close readings already furnished, I expected the conclusion to reflect more fully on larger issues, especially on the relation between the New Man, literary characters, and narrative structures such as the marriage plot. That said, this book sets out a clear thesis and supports it with sophisticated close readings and historical evidence. In expanding the field of masculinity studies by highlighting the critically ignored figure of the New Man, it joins Phillip Mallett's edited collection (cited above and also published in 2015) as a contribution to our understanding of the Victorian male.

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