

International Interdisciplinary Conference

“Constructions of Masculinity in British Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present”
(Technische Universität Dresden, 17. – 20. Juni 2009)

Organised by Prof. Dr. Stefan Horlacher (TU Dresden) with the support of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaft, this four-day interdisciplinary conference devoted to constructions of masculinity in British literature from the medieval period to the present, immediately demonstrated the contemporary relevance of its subject matter. Beyond exercising the scholarly minds of presenters and participants from a range of academic fields in Europe and the US, it also attracted the attention of the media, with Germany’s preeminent tabloid newspaper *Bild* as well as the television channel MDR losing no time in reporting on the event. Their interest and the interest of the public of course stems from the perception of contemporary masculinity as being in a state of almost perpetual crisis, the typical manifestations of which are the increasing gender divide in school examination results, male perpetrated violence in the home or workplace and most dramatically the copycat massacres in schools and colleges.

It was thus fitting that given the flurry of media interest in matters masculine the conference opened with three papers that emphasized the growing cultural, social and political significance of masculinity studies as an academic discipline. Horlacher’s introductory paper addressed from a theoretical perspective the key questions of “Why Masculinities?” and “Why Literature?”, thereby establishing the latter as the preeminent discursive resource for epistemological insights into the historical development and contemporary relevance of masculinities. In his keynote address, Harry Brod (Northern Iowa), one of the founders of masculinity studies in the US, traced the emergence of this field of enquiry into a fully-fledged discipline with its own key theoretical texts, debates and concepts, identifying the desideratum of establishing a nexus between Eve Sedgwick’s concept of homosociality and Raewyn Connell’s research into hegemonial masculinity. The second keynote speaker, Richard Collier (Newcastle), explored the challenge of changing public perceptions of male violence arising from the high-profile media interventions of paternity rights groups such as Fathers4Justice in the UK. The opening theoretical and interdisciplinary part of the conference concluded with a paper by Kevin Floyd (Kent State) that drew on Judith Butler’s analysis of heterosexual normativity in order to then critique the division between Queer and Transgender Studies as well as historical and theoretical approaches.

The main thematic section of the conference was devoted to analyses of exemplary, representative primary texts and the concomitant changes in the representation and construction of masculinity from the Middle Ages to the present. Two contributions on the medieval Romance genre opened this section, both offering readings against the grain of genre-specific masculinity formations. Andrew James Johnston (FU Berlin), in “Robin, Gamelyn and Medieval Masculine Escapism”, elicited the transgressive potential of the *Gamelyn* text, linking a social order in transition to contradictory (e.g. heroic/naïve) manifestations of masculinity. Christoph Houswitschka (Bamberg), in “Masculinity and Chivalric Prowess”, showed how in Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* scenes of demonstrative, hegemonial masculinity are undermined by anxiety and the pervasive threat of violence, with Lancelot’s preeminence thus ultimately marking an exaggerated chivalric ideal.

Early modern representations of masculinity were examined by Thomas Kühn (Dresden) and Gabriele Rippl (Bern). The former considered the implications of virile masculinity being almost solely the province of the fallen angels in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and contrasted this with “heaven’s lack of masculinities”. The latter, offering an entirely different and original perspective in her paper “Images of Masculinity in Texts of Early Modern Women”, was able to demonstrate

how even in autobiographical texts by women, descriptions of male family members predominate, thus perpetuating the Renaissance ideals of honour and justice.

Three contributions dealing with texts from the 18th century marked the transition from Renaissance and Augustan conceptions of masculinity to the modern era. Isabel Karreman (Munich) compared the repression of the abject in the masculine ideals propagated by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury with their satirical reprise in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In "The Male Gaze vs. Sexual Ventriloquism", Laurenz Volkmann (Jena) examined how in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* the robust masculine Christianity of the novel and its hero have been superseded by more critical readings emphasizing homoerotic and colonial aspects. Rainer Emig (Hanover) considered 'Sentimental Masculinity' in Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, where, on the cusp of the Romantic era, the eponymous hero's failure to reconcile contradictory expectations can be read as pointing the way to modern conceptions of masculinity.

Popular fiction in the 19th century was the focus of the next two papers. Ralf Schneider's (Bielefeld) typology of Victorian masculinities as caricatures and outsiders in Gothic/crime fiction from Collins to Conan-Doyle demonstrated the structured absence of the normative *pater familias*, constructed – if at all – *ex negativo* from the idealised, trivialised, demonised or eccentric male figures that populate these novels. In their joint paper "The Props of Masculinity", Susanne Scholz (Frankfurt/Main) und Nicola Dropmann (Erlangen) examined the latent inferiority complex underpinning dominant male roles in the adventure novels of Rider Haggard.

Opening the section on 20th century fiction, Silvia Mergenthal (Constance) examined the long shadow cast by the Great War via Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, comparing this late 20th-century fictionalised rendering of the war poet Sassoon with the latter's own as well as his contemporary Graves's account in their respective memoirs and demonstrating the traumatic implications of phenomena such as shell shock and male bonding on gender construction. Claudia Lainka (Mannheim), in her Lacanian reading of Cowper-Powys's novel *Wolf Solent*, argued for the emergence of 'fluid' masculinities and, moving into the post-war era, Sebastian Müller (Mannheim) traced the legacy of a problematic virile masculinity as portrayed in the Angry Young Man movement beyond its immediate 1950s English literary context through to contemporary filmic manifestations. With reference to the novels of Forster, Hollinghurst and Wakefield, Berthold Schoene (Manchester) examined the nexus of subversion, legalisation and assimilation in the construction of gay masculinities. Fatemeh Hosseini (Dresden) charted the shift from patriarchal to filiarchal structures in the early novels of McEwan, and Andrea Ochsner (Basel) examined the phenomenon of Lad Lit with reference to the novels of Hornby, O'Farrel and Lott, where the problematic positioning of masculinity between the New Man and New Lad is read as coterminous with a postmodern crisis of identity and the surfeit of male (media) scripts that can serve as role models at the beginning of the 21st century.

The concluding panel discussion focussed on two main aspects, emphasizing firstly – with reference to the opening theoretical contributions by Horlacher, Brod, Collier and Floyd – the centrality of the body and Butler's theory of performativity in any general definition of masculinity, especially with a view to how male (sexual/textual) identity is accorded a different meaning within different epochs and across different genres. A second major aspect of the discussions was whether the perceived crisis of masculinity is largely a contemporary phenomenon or an inherent feature of male identity formation as many of the textual analyses seemed to imply. Plotting a literary history of British masculinities in terms of an ongoing, succession of crises proved however to be a controversial turning point in the discussion, suggesting the necessity of further research and a follow-up conference, which will take place at the TU Dresden in June 2010. The projected publication date of the proceedings is 2011.

Peter Stear (FU Berlin)