



**“Men Made Out of Words”:
Reading Men Writing Masculinities
in Australian Literature**

by

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I consent to this thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Matthew Heley

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to enlarge upon the possibilities which have been opened up by feminism and gay studies to the study of masculinity in some Australian literary texts. If feminism has made “masculinity” a problem of gender, then gay male activism has made it a problem of sexuality. This thesis seeks to problematise hegemonic constructions of masculinity along both of these axes, as well as along the axes of race, and, to a lesser extent, class.

In the introduction I argue that conventional or androcentric reading practices dissimulate “masculinity” as a constructed category, and argue that for straight white men in society, the so-called “hegemonic subjects,” locating a reading position from which to analyse masculinity means inaugurating a discourse of gender *through* feminist discourses of sexual politics. I argue that if men are serious about building into their critical practice a performative understanding of masculinity then they must also be able to theorise their identities as relational, and never completely articulable in relation to, the other.

The chapters that follow attempt to lay bare some of the discourses constructing hegemonic and marginal masculinities. In Chapter One, I read two postmodernist texts as disarticulating the patriarchal-masculine through their problematising of patriarchal inscriptions of Woman.

In chapter two, I interpret the crisis of masculinity in chapter one as a crisis of hegemony experienced by the “white” male subject in “Asia.” The crisis of hegemony arises precisely from his “alterity” in the gaze of the other, and, ironically, his homogenisation in this gaze *as* a racial other.

Chapter three picks up a theme mentioned in chapter two: that is, the territorialisation of the male body in hegemonic social practices. In this chapter I argue that hegemonic discourses of masculinity are constructed precisely around a binary of a “lacking” and “complete” male body, a binary which is able to be deconstructed through the very logic of intelligibility it deploys to tell the two bodies apart.

In chapter four I focus on the production of sexuality and the homosexual man in discourses of hegemonic masculinity. In this chapter I discuss the most pervasive of all foreclosures, the one effecting the terms of male homo/heterosexual definition, a binary relation which is itself able to be read as being constitutive of, and constituted by, the binaries of masculine/feminine and male/female.

I conclude by arguing that male subjects must always theorise their identities from a position within the Symbolic order, such as it is, since only by contesting the terms of their engendering and problematising patriarchal social practice can masculinity be reconstructed.

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Preface

I knew in certain crucial ways I was outside the mainstream, that the dominant male world of football and alcohol and cars frightened me, although I believe that I disguised my fears behind a veneer of sophistication and intellect, which in retrospect seems painfully priggish.

Dennis Altman, *The Comfort of Men*, 107

In his article from *Men in Feminism*, "Reading Like a Man," Robert Scholes comes to the belated conclusion: "For me, born when I was born and living where I have lived, the very best I can do is to be conscious of the ground upon which I stand: to read not as but like a man" (Scholes, 218). Scholes is responding to Culler's piece, "Reading as a Woman," in which Culler argues that deconstruction allows the reader to hypothesise, and thus move into, a feminine reading position, which in turn presumably allows male critics to read as women.¹ For Scholes, however, the appropriation of this "space" by men is exactly a repetition of the patriarchal tradition, in which a man's speaking as a woman is also a speaking for and of women. Scholes argues that Culler's position is made possible only if we do away with the importance of the "experience" of being a woman, to which he responds: "No man should seek in any way to diminish the authority which the experience of women gives them in speaking about that experience" (Scholes, 217-18).

In the context of the *Men in Feminism* forum, Scholes' criticism of Culler is warranted, and echoes contributions by Stephen Heath in his article "Male Feminism" (of which more later). In the wider context of the sexual politics of masculinity (which differ from those of "male feminism"), however, his conclusion takes us nowhere in particular. Ironically, in the traditionally male discipline of literary criticism, to read

¹ "Reading as a Woman" is contained in Culler's *On Deconstruction*.

like a man has always been...not declaring what reading like a man is like. Indeed, the shift from reading *as* to reading *like* a man in the last line of Scholes' article might well make the necessity of asking *what* men do when they read less pressing. Scholes implies that as long as men acknowledge that they can not read as women, or even as feminists, then there should be no problem.² Such a declaration, as Heath points out in "Male Feminism," is the first step in the construction of an "ethics of sexual difference" (Heath, "Male Feminism," 26). Scholes' proclamation that "the best I can do is be conscious of the ground upon which I stand" may be a kind of "chivalry" (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 26), but it is also an explicit bracketing of the discursiveness of the "male" and the "masculine." Scholes indicates that "reading like a man" involves some kind of interpellation into an institutional framework, but does not consider how this framework *works* to conceal the very genderedness of "reading like a man." To read "like" a man means to be *like* other men who read like you. But upon what basis can equivalences among men – the basis of this "likeness" – be established? Mimicry?

Joseph Bristow argues that straight-identified men are still without a "vocabulary for articulating a radical difference within the sex/gender hierarchy" (Bristow, "Men After Feminism," 60). Bristow notes that in literary studies in particular, "there is little discernible movement by men to situate, analyse, and realise historical changes in the masculinities represented in the texts (often male ones) set before them" (Bristow, "Men After Feminism," 60). Scholes' resort to the "ground upon which I stand" in order to define his subject-position may let traditional humanism in the back-door, but we can see how it is allowed precisely by the kind of

² In an extreme reading of Scholes' position, Diane Elam argues: "If a man can never read like or even as a woman, can never really be a feminist and thus can never be 'right,' all he can do is look up (not down) and try to enjoy the show. The spectator's position can be highly irresponsible because it allows the viewer to ignore the obligations that feminism and deconstruction impose" (Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, 23).

absence to which Bristow is referring: an absence of a language (and I would add a sexual/political imperative) from which to problematise the “ground,” the “masculine,” the “experience” of being a “man.”

At the beginning of his article published in *Engendering Men*, “(In)visible Alliances: Conflicting ‘Chronicles’ of Feminism,” Robert Vorlicky, a man living in New York, describes an experience he thinks many men are finding familiar, namely that of being made “invisible” by his female feminist friend’s declaration that “men have nothing to offer me, as a woman” (Vorlicky, 275). The conversation from which this declaration springs has been prompted by the news of a brutal beating, rape and murder of a woman by a group of men in Central Park, and Vorlicky’s friend is laying the blame squarely at the feet of men as a whole: “‘What is in men to make them do this?’ she remarked. ‘In a woman-centred world this wouldn’t have happened’” (Vorlicky, 275). Vorlicky, too, expresses outrage at the brutal actions of these men, but takes as his point of departure not the macabre event, but the exchanges that follow between him and his female feminist friends. As a self-identified “male feminist,” Vorlicky feels hurt by the blanket association of him with men who clearly are not like him: “Aside from men’s biological bodies, we can no longer assume that the collective body of ‘men’ is (if it ever was) a visible, cohesive identity” (Vorlicky, 276), adding that this is “certainly true of those males who have come of age within feminism” (Vorlicky, 276). Vorlicky’s lament in this article is that men engaged in “feminist” activity are often ignored, repressed or made invisible in the public sphere, while nonetheless being

visible presences in life – men who are actively living the change. [Men] can be seen in homes raising their children while their partners are at work; on the streets marching for Equal Rights and Pro-Choice movements; in conversations discoursing on their relationships to women and other men, mindful that the personal is political. (Vorlicky, 276-7)

Vorlicky is appealing to a kind of empiricism, but this time it is one substantiated not by a “ground” but by an “identity” forged from his engagement in progressive sexual politics. This engagement with the theory and practice of sexual politics also makes him feel “different,” invisible. The matter of his invisibility, however, comes down to the question of who is “looking” and from where. Vorlicky wants women to see him as a man set apart from other men. However, his own identification is not with the images of the male contained in radical feminist newsletters, but with those images of reconstructed, post-feminist masculinity coming from men’s groups. For Vorlicky, the trouble is that society does not know how to cope with this (self)representation of masculinity; it ignores or ridicules it.

Vorlicky’s article highlights two important difficulties in the construction of masculinity *after* feminism, some of which are also implied by Scholes. With specific reference to Scholes, the first difficulty arises when we posit “experience” as the “ground” of subjectivity, and relatedly, as the basis of a shared or collective identity. Indeed, Scholes’ own objection to Culler is to his elision of the bodily processes which, Scholes argues, are experienced differently by men and women (I will come back to this point). The second difficulty has to do with Vorlicky’s declaration of his difference from other men: how can this difference be framed or articulated within feminist-centred discourses of sexual politics, and does it really matter if it can’t be? To return to Scholes for a moment, to see the ground of “experience” and the “body” as suitable referents, or sites, of political and social identification for men, is problematic because of the difficulty of quantifying it. As Diana Fuss argues, “Bodily experiences may seem self-evident and immediately perceptible but they are always socially mediated” (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 25). In short, men experience their

bodies differently. If the body is the referent of experience, then “experience” cannot be a referent of “likeness.”

Men must be able to consider their own differences from each other (otherwise any idea of change, movement or exchange might as well be forgotten about), but also how these differences are themselves constructed in a system of gender relations which values the “male” and the “masculine” over the “female” and the “feminine,” and which, in this construction, also produces the discourses through which the analysis of gender can take place. The need to address masculinity as a “structure” (rather than as just a personal “style”) is particularly acute when we consider the position of men who are empowered along some axes (because of their “whiteness” or their heterosexuality), and disempowered (including in relation to women) along others. White middle-class gay men, for example, who do not “publicly” identify themselves as gay men may well be empowered in relation to women, as well as over non-white heterosexual men: “It is ... a significant fact of the social being of a very large number of gay white males that we have always had the option of power and privilege” (Bersani, *Homos*, 67). As Bersani points out, this option means that white gay men cannot simply line themselves up along a continuum of oppression, for example, with gay black men, or white women (Bersani, *Homos*, 66ff). Eve Sedgwick argues that we must ask how certain kinds oppression are intertwined with each other, “and especially how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 33).

In this thesis I want to argue that the movement between “men” as a “collective body” and “men” as a fractured and multiple site can be made, but that it must be accompanied by an address to the political status of men, as a “collectivity,” in

patriarchy. Initially, I wanted to avoid installing a master narrative of patriarchal oppression. I have since been made aware that perhaps this avoidance is symptomatic of patriarchal social practice itself. Because I always tried to resist the imperative to be a “man,” I did not think it necessary to consider what reading or writing as a “man” meant; to do so would have been to comply somehow with this imperative, to interpret the conduct of my life within its terms. But there is another dimension to this: what if the refusal to acknowledge my gendered and sexed “reading” position actually proves my flush interpellation into the hegemonic discourse of masculinity in our culture? What if the most damning indictment of my complicity with this discourse is the fact that I do not want to confront it?

At the same moment, I want to build into the argument of this thesis a certain scepticism toward what Nancy Miller calls the “position of representativity” (Miller, ix), especially when it comes to “men” speaking. I do not want to suggest that men should not “speak” about their masculinity, as they see it, but that speaking is not *necessarily* an act of liberation or empowerment, just as the act of self-representation is not necessarily affirmative. Men should always be concerned with *how* they speak, through what discourses, and how these discourses are shaped. A major concern of this thesis is with how the subject-position “men” is itself constructed. What does it mean to constitute oneself as a “man,” and to declare oneself “masculine”? Moreover, how is declaring oneself a man (or not a “man”) itself a kind of declaration, or marking out, of a power relation? If I suggest that because of my age or class I am somehow de-centred within hegemonic masculinity, am I just dissimulating my own power? Perhaps so. Hegemonic masculinities, I will argue in the course of this thesis, maintain their dominance precisely by passing themselves off, with the complicity of men, as

incontestable. The points of resistance to the hegemonic imperative have been generated by feminist and gay practice, and it would, as Scholes, for one, argues, be disingenuous for men to think these positions of resistance, or subject-positions, are open to everyone.

The main purpose of the Introduction is to place my reading and writing “self” within a discursive space, even though I know that this space is not anything I can “name” or mark out definitively. The exasperated “and so on” supplementing the list of differences along which identity can be tracked mocks the very attempt to construct a stable position of enunciation. A subject, as post-structuralist theory argues, is a site of multiple and heterogeneous differences (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 33). The whole question of how we can interpret identity or map the movement of subjects into subject-positions rests on how we understand the interaction of social and discursive practices, and how these practices “fix” identities in the field of difference that comprises the social. Within this field, “masculinity” dissolves and reappears like an apparition: it dissolves because we mostly regard it as being “natural,” the proper way of being; it reappears because hegemonic masculinity is *itself* defined by what it attempts to exclude. The resistance to hegemonic masculinity tracks along the various vectors of difference forming around feminist and gay politics, and inflecting all other responses to it, including, hopefully those of the men hegemonic masculinity most privileges.

To this extent, the calibration of the theoretical gaze in this thesis is from the “reified identity” – and the questions we might ask of it, for example, “what is a man?” “how does a man read?” and so on – to the discursive structures and practices that present us with such a thing as a “man,” the “masculine,” the “male,” a complete

subject. In “Interrogating Identity” Homi Bhabha frames this shift as “the interrogation of the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed” (Bhabha, 47). Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* calls on the Foucauldian model of “genealogical inquiry” to analyse the ways gender performatively-constitutes that which it “names,” that is, the “naturalness” of gender difference as it is mapped across bodies within the regulative frame of “compulsory heterosexuality”:

A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. (Butler, *Gender*, ix)

Whatever constitutes hegemonic masculinity in our culture at any moment, it should be thought of principally, though not exclusively, in its political dimensions. The deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity should involve the “making visible” of the repressed vectors of difference that it articulates into an “identity.” If gender identity, in Butler’s formulation, is “performative” in the sense that is (re)iteratively produced, then any intervention into the discourse of hegemonic masculinity should also follow this logic. If hegemonic masculinities appear as “positivities,” as stable and self-identical structures of identity, it is not because they are either, but rather because of the predisposition of the social and political imaginaries of our culture. These imaginaries, at the risk of entering a circuit of circular logic, are held in place by the power of the collective belief in the opaqueness of the power and difference constructing them.

In the Introduction I begin to address the question of how we might see the “masculine” as a fractured site, and, at the same time, a site of sexual politics for men.

Additionally, I argue that this problem impinges directly on how we might read masculinities in texts. If to read “masculinities” as fractured – against the dominant or hegemonic idea of the “masculine” as stable, monolithic – is to be efficacious, then we must be able to place this fracturing in a (sexual) political context. Indeed, I argue that a sexual politics of masculinity must accompany any attempt to reconstruct masculinity. To this extent, the reading practices of this thesis are performative: in them I attempt to negotiate the various hegemonic and alternative or abject reading positions made available in texts *through* a conception of sexual politics. Diana Fuss argues that when we read, we are “caught within and between *at least* two constantly shifting subject-positions (old and new, constructed and constructing)” (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 33). To apprehend alternative and non-hegemonic masculinities in texts which are heavily overdetermined by ideologies of gender means negotiating with the terms of hegemonic discourse, and of carving out alternative reading positions, and through this clearing of space, the imagining of alternative male subjectivities. Tania Modleski’s assertion that a feminist reading practice should be “performative” resonates significantly here:

[A] fully politicised feminist criticism has seldom been content to ascertain old meanings and (in the manner of ethnographers) take the measure of already-constituted subjectivities; it has aimed, rather, at bringing into being *new* meanings and *new* subjectivities, seeking to articulate not only what *is* but “what has never been.” In this respect, it may be said to have a performative dimension – i.e., to be doing something beyond restating already existent ideas and views, wherever these might happen to reside. (Modleski, 46)

I take the “masculine” in this thesis to be an unstable signifier. The first thing we must do is to forget about trying to get at the “truth” of masculinity. Rather than argue from a preconceived idea of what “masculinity” is, I want to analyse the ways in which “masculinity” signifies a particular relation of power, or a particular

configuration of subjectivity. This means not only divesting masculinity of its “universality,” which is an essential first step, but rather of developing a deconstructive or “performative” reading practice, in Modleski’s sense, which is not predicated on the rediscovery or recuperation of “masculinity” within the terms of hegemonic masculinity, but of analysing how the articulation of discourses of gender, sex, class, race and so on (re)produce “instances” of masculinity, and proscribes the assumption of identity for male subjects.