



Sarah Colvin, Peter Davies, eds. *Masculinity and German Culture*. Edinburgh German Yearbook. Rochester: Camden House, 2008. 277 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-361-8.

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## Current Research into German Masculinity

The second installment of the Edinburgh German Yearbook—a series aimed at encouraging “lively and open discussion of themes pertinent to German Studies”—delivers a range of essays dealing with German masculinity from a variety of academic and theoretical angles. All are relatively short, and generally aimed at giving an impression of the work currently being done rather than developing a long, sustained argument. The quality of the essays is rather uneven; nevertheless, the reader emerges at the end with an impression of the current vitality of masculinity studies in the arena of German studies and a real appreciation for the way that these essays suggest some of the major directions of research.

Three of the essays examine the construction of what the sociologist Robert Connell calls “hegemonic masculinity”; that is, the notion of masculinity that tends to dominate a particular culture at any given time. Cordula Politis shows the victory of hegemonic masculinity in the twelfth-century *Leit von Troye* by Herbot von Fritzlar. As she puts it, the annihilation of transgressive females in the form of the Amazons in this text represents a “resolution to a dilemma which threatens masculine self-definition” (p. 23). Bryan Ganaway’s contribution moves forward to the turn of the twentieth century; he examines the role that toys played within debates about masculinity at the time. Ganaway acknowledges that a number of artists and intellectuals influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement promoted the importance of artistic materials and hand-made toys for enabling men to become nurturing and creative. However, in general he shows that the majority of factory-made toys clearly assumed that the German man was supposed to be “physically fit, at ease with technology, a citizen-soldier, and the head of a household” (p. 97). Clare Bielby turns her sights on the mid-twentieth century,

arguing that German media marginalized the “revolutionary masculinity” associated with the student protests of the 1960s by coding them as both feminine and grotesque.

The bulk of the essays concerns the different kinds of challenges that have been presented at various times to hegemonic masculinity. Many scholars have argued that masculinity went through a crisis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as older notions of masculinity were challenged by the rise of the woman’s movement, the growth of socialism, the rise of “the masses,” the growing visibility of homosexuals in urban areas, the critiques made by the avant-garde, the lure of consumerism, and, finally, the impact of technologized warfare.[1] Two essays examine literary products that seem to reflect this crisis: Stephanie Catani’s “Kultur in der Krise,” which looks at works by Alfred Döblin and Robert Musil; and Elizabeth Krimer’s “A New Kind of Woman,” which examines the feminized soldier of World War I as portrayed in works by Erich Maria Remarque, Ernst Jünger, and Heinrich Böll.

Another group examines specific critiques of masculinity posed at different times. Michael Gratzke examines the ambivalent attitude towards heroism of nineteenth-century author Theodor Fontane and the criticisms this ambivalence led Fontane to make of the Prussian militaristic ideal of masculinity. Ingrid Sharp examines a number of key East German stories from the 1970s dealing with gender-swapping that, Sharp argues, challenged the gender assumptions promoted by the GDR. Elke Gilson looks at a contemporary German novel, *Pong* (1998), by the Bulgarian-German writer Sibylle Lewitscharoff. This novel, Gilson argues, tell the story of “an eccentric madman who is obsessed with the Bible,” thereby producing “something like a cultural pathology of masculinity”

(p. 231). One of the most thought-provoking pieces of the collection, though, is by David James Prickett, whose essay “Double Exposure” brings together photography of men, scientific photography, police photography, and photographs published in turn-of-the-century homosexual magazines. Through a queer reading of these photographs, he suggests “not only the staging of a model’s masculinity [in these photographs] but also the total photographic setting challenged the supposedly inherent truth of the photographic medium and the integrity of the masculine project” (p. 114).

The last group of contributions turns to constructions of masculinity that provided alternatives to prevailing contemporary hegemonic notions. Theresia Heimerl examines the impression of masculinity that emerges from the life and writing of two male Christian mystics of the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart and Heinrich Seuse. Although they differed in several key ways, in general the two agreed that the traditional understanding of masculinity was of little value in the search for a mystical experience, and could even be “schädlich und hinderlich” (p. 47). Antje Roeben turns to the Romantic novels of the late eighteenth century, whose central characters posed an alternative vision of masculinity to that favored by the individualistic, bourgeois society emerging at the time. Martin Lücke analyzes the gender construction of late-nineteenth-century sexology, much of which, Lücke argues, tried to pose a version of masculinity that integrated both masculine and feminine attributes. Katie Sutton demonstrates the impact of dandy style in the early Weimar Republic. Finally, two authors turn to contemporary Germany. Frauke Matthes takes on the issue of Turkish-German masculinity by analyzing two novels by Feridun Zaimoğlu. Sarah Colvin examines the masculinity of young men in prison as portrayed in several novels but also as can be discerned from documentary evidence.

Readers will note a tension between the essays contained in the body of the collection—which tend to presuppose notions such as “hegemony” and “crisis”—and the introduction to the work offered by Peter Davies, which seeks to bring these very notions into question. The problem with the notion of a “crisis of masculinity” is the difficulty of finding a time when masculinity was actually secure and stable. Increasingly, scholars of gender are moving to a model of masculinity that assumes its permanent, structural insecurity. At certain times, one can certainly find more evidence of crises, but increasingly we are seeing

such discourse as part of a larger strategy to privilege particular views of masculinity. In other words, such evidence marks a cultural struggle over meaning, not a socio-psychological crisis per se.

The notion of “hegemony,” on the other hand, is a firmly established one by now, and Davies will have his work cut out for him if he hopes to convince historians to discard it anytime soon. As Davies himself notes, hegemony permits simultaneous awareness of masculinity as plural and as a concept with a dominant ideological function. Many scholars of masculinity would argue that hegemony is a significant step beyond an older paradigm that assumed that masculinity has a permanent, stable definition, deeply entrenched in history either by cultural structures of social patriarchy or by psychological dynamics. Davies clearly agrees, but he also raises some interesting questions about the usefulness of this concept. Is it really possible for a single version of masculinity to assume a completely dominant position within a complex society? Have we always been careful enough to define what this hegemonic version actually is at any given time? Do we sometimes slip too easily between the psychological and sociological dimensions of masculinity in our search for a dominant version? These are all good questions that have led researchers to interrogate the theoretical basis of their own work in often troubling ways. However, I suspect the term will persist, at least until historians can come up with another theoretical framework for probing the power relations between different versions of masculinity.

As the introduction undermines some basic concepts employed in the remainder of the essays, it might have been better positioned as a postscript rather than an introduction. It seemed to me a little unfair on the part of the editor—indeed, it is the biggest problem with the collection—to raise such fundamental doubts about the essays from the very start, especially as they employ concepts still widely accepted and exploited by scholars of gender. The variety of perspectives and disciplines included here naturally means that no reader will be interested in all them equally, or entirely happy with the selection. However, if taken on its own terms, the collection does succeed in providing a useful overview of some current work and in encouraging a creative interaction between the different viewpoints.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, George Mosse, *The Image of Man: Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 78-79.

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