

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Women Writing Men: Female Victorian Authors and Their Representations of Masculinity

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This dissertation covers five female Victorian authors (Elizabeth Gaskell, M.E. Braddon, Dinah Craik, Juliana Horatia Ewing, Edith Nesbit) and the representations of masculinity in their novels. By taking a masculinity studies approach, this dissertation finds that these novels, in an attempt to gain authority and legitimacy in the male-dominated social sphere, often promoted middle-class masculine gender identities as the dominant, ideal masculinity for others. I will argue that female authors in the Victorian period took part in this struggle over re/defining hegemonic male gender identity in different ways, in different genres, for different purposes. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* seek to ensure middle-class dominance over the working classes. Braddon's novels *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* illustrate the unnaturalness of gender (and thus to call into question notions of "natural" differences between men and women, or men and other men) and broaden the definition of acceptable gender identities for men and, by extension, women. The authors of late-period children's literature created texts that either changed or shield from change both male and female gender identities to define the proper way to educate children during a time when gender roles were undergoing changes due to innovations in industry, education, and calls for equal rights for women and non-hegemonic men. All of these texts display a great amount of confidence in the power of literature to shape gender identity. The male characters in novels covered in this dissertation help govern the individual from abstract potential to concrete reality in terms of how masculinity is lived in the everyday world. While pamphlets, medical journals, and conduct books can instruct the reader on ideal conduct (or, conversely, warn against inappropriate conduct) for men, women, boys, and girls, these texts often function in the abstract. The belief held by these authors in the power of literature is enables them to position fictional men in the real world under the assumption that these characters are therefore able to "live out" these ideas of what is and what is not appropriate in performing one's male gender identity.