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BE A MAN!

Kenneth Cmiel

David Leverenz. *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989. x + 372 pp. Notes and index. \$32.50.

In the early nineteenth century, the New York critic Rufus Griswold argued that John Milton was “more emphatically *American* than any author who has lived in the United States.” Margaret Fuller heartily agreed. Milton was so American, she claimed, because he expressed that “primitive vitality” which *was* America. Moreover, she added, the great poet understood “the scope of a manly education.” American literature, primitive vitality, and masculinity—the connections have fascinated critics for a long time.¹

David Leverenz has written a very engaging book on just these topics. *Manhood and the American Renaissance* explores the ways that antebellum debates about masculinity affected those writers associated with the American Renaissance. Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville play leading roles, but many others—male and female—have significant parts as well. Leverenz has written literary history, but the kind that should be of interest to all sorts of historians. He sees social history as throwing light upon literary production, and his subtlety is such that his literary analysis in turn yields further insight into social relations of the period.

Leverenz argues that three basic masculine ideals were available in the mid-nineteenth century. The genteel patrician was the cultured gentleman of the old school. The artisan valued personal independence and pride in work. The aggressive self-made man was at the center of the new business culture. He was preoccupied with power and force, imposing his will upon the world out of fear of being crushed by it.

The core of the battle, Leverenz claims, was the fight between the self-made man and the patrician. He argues that the artisan was never close to a hegemonic position. He also argues, perhaps more controversially, that the fight was largely *within* male culture. That is, men were not so much threatened by women as battling among themselves for cultural dominance. And “battle” is exactly the right word. The story Leverenz tells is one of intense male rivalry. Men act out of the fear of being humiliated by other men.

These conflicts, Leverenz contends, fed directly into the production of antebellum literature. Scholars since William Charvat have noted that most early nineteenth-century male writers came from patrician backgrounds and had to come to grips with the new entrepreneurial civilization. But in two ways Leverenz adds to this analysis. First, the richness of his typology suggests more nuanced and detailed sense of what exactly was involved in the literary self-fashioning. Second, he does not treat his authors as neatly falling into the social types of the time, but rather as negotiating among them. His authors merge different selves together, sometimes strategically, other times unwittingly. Lives often interfere with literary presentation; often literary presentation itself is divided. Leverenz stresses that the models he starts with are ideal types. The actual texts, and the actual authors, are far more complicated.

For example, Leverenz finds Francis Parkman's celebration of masculine toughness in *The Oregon Trail* (1849) a literary pose. Parkman adopted the harsh entrepreneurial male ideal of power and force as a prelude to his own very secure patrician career. The same was true of Richard Dana. His *Two Years before the Mast* builds a bridge to the self-made aggressive self as Dana himself was settling down to a very genteel life.

From the other direction, Leverenz chronicles how Frederick Douglass fashioned and refashioned his persona, contrasting the ex-slave's two autobiographies, the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The climax of the earlier text occurs when Douglass fights and beats the vicious slave breaker Covey. Language of force and power pervade that passage, which is prefaced by Douglass saying: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." By the time of the 1855 autobiography, however, that persona is softened by a veneer of gentlemanly refinement. Douglass mixes the two models together, continuing to identify himself as basically self-made, but now seasoned with a touch of patrician gentility.

Writers like Parkman and Douglass tried to adapt to the changing class structure of mid-nineteenth-century America. Other writers, Leverenz argues, took a different approach. Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville all came to terms with the rise of a business civilization and the demands it made on masculinity by producing self-consciously ambiguous literature. These writers, Leverenz contends, began a tradition of alienated mind play, setting themselves apart from the aggressive male world of the self-made man by throwing all representations into confusion.

Leverenz devotes his most detailed attention to Melville and Hawthorne. Both writers, he argues, readily mocked the aggressive entrepreneurial masculinity of the time. But they also developed "ways of pulling the rug out

from under the ordinary reader's rush to sympathy or judgment" (p. 228). Melville's Ahab moves from "manly rage to the pose of female hysteria" (p. 291) and then back again. Hawthorne adopts double voices, and builds contradictory characters that inevitably destabilize the reader. It is hard to tell whether key characters are aggressive businessmen or secret patricians. It is impossible to figure out Hawthorne's own attitude toward such characters.

This approach to literature, Leverenz contends, was very purposeful. Ambiguity implied a different way to be a man: "Hawthorne and Melville assert the writer's manly individuality not directly, by affirming bourgeois conventions of self-reliance and self-control as Dana and Parkman do, but deviously, by subverting the reader's self-assurance" (p. 228). Ambiguity became a bracing literary ideology that taught these writers how to unnerve the public and be stoically tougher than the self-made man. Literary ambiguity was a hidden gender code.

My own description does not do justice to how skillfully Leverenz weaves together the different strands of his analysis. The author's categories are not wooden slots in which to slip people. The stress on ambiguity and shifting personae is a real asset. Leverenz presents a very lucid analysis of complexity.

One of the book's main themes is that "gender pressures help to bury class conflicts" (p. 7). American writers fought about what it was to be a "man." In the process, they stopped understanding the class implications of such disputes. Leverenz paints a picture of class conflict that could not recognize itself as such because of gendered rhetoric.

Leverenz has a point about the way discussion proceeded. But I think he has missed a chance to extend his analysis. He has not seen how his own discussion of role-mixing might be a key reason for the absence of class consciousness. Leverenz talks of the fight between the gentry and middle class for dominance. Yet who in his book fits neatly into such a cast? His own analysis shows how Dana, Emerson, Melville, Parkman, Douglass, and Hawthorne roam from one self to another, unsure of their place in American life and continually remaking themselves as a consequence. There is so much self-fashioning and so little stability that it is no wonder that class slots did not seem very clear.

Cultural forms remained constant and public. One doesn't have to look hard in mid-nineteenth-century public culture to find stock images of the gentleman, independent artisan, or self-made man. But Leverenz's own evidence suggests that the *uses* of those forms became quite complex. A Dana or Parkman would add a measure of cruel brutality to comfort themselves about their sedentary patrician life. Emerson would embrace the fiercely independent artisanal culture, his gentlemanly aloofness mitigated via *nostalgie pour la boue*. On the other hand, a "self-made man" like Frederick Douglass would re-

fashion himself to include a facade of gentility. The categories Leverenz begins with appear to be so porous that one cannot help but wonder if porousness itself is not the main point.

Ambiguity, far from being just another masculine model, was central to the age. The complicated uses of established cultural forms was common, and it threw people for a loop. It was one reason Europeans often thought there were no classes in the United States. People just didn't seem to act the way they should. They leapt from self to self. It could be very confusing. One British observer marvelled that Andrew Johnson seemed to have "two natures." In private Johnson was elegantly dressed, the model of "tact and decorum," but when harranguing "the multitude," he lost himself "in a frenzy of excitement," no longer the "calm, self-restrained ruler of a great people, but the partisan fighting for his life amid furious enemies in Tennessee." James Fenimore Cooper, pretending to be a European in *Notions of the Americans*, put it this way: "There has been so singular a compound of intelligence, kindness, natural politeness, coarseness and even vulgarity . . . that I am often utterly baffled in the attempt to give them a place in the social scale."²

The fluid self also surfaced in more formal social thought, often juxtaposed right next to what seem to be very rigid categories. "Male and female represent the two sides of a radical dualism," claimed Margaret Fuller. "But, in fact," she immediately added, "they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens into solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman." In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels first suggest that the world is splitting into capitalist and proletariat but three pages later claim that commercial culture is so ruthlessly unsettling that all is flux. "All that is solid melts into air. . . ."³

That last observation accurately reflects much of the analysis that Leverenz presents. His authors shift, add, and retreat across the cultural stereotypes of the age. Like Andrew Johnson, many of his writers seemed to have "two natures." A ruthlessly innovative commercial culture contributed to all kinds of role-mixing. With personality in flux, it was harder for the writers to see class.

There are complaints to be registered. There is psychoanalysis that many readers will find strained. It is also by no means clear that all this male rivalry was as intra-gendered as Leverenz claims. Fear of emasculation could come from women as well as other men. More attention could have been devoted to the androgyny of Walt Whitman or Margaret Fuller. Finally, the portrait of the self-made man in this book is so unremittingly brutal that one becomes skeptical. Brutality there was aplenty in the nineteenth century, but surely there was more. This was, after all, a culture whose best read literature suggested that the meek were blessed and would inherit the earth. Indeed, in

1879 Thomas Hughes wrote a book on just that subject, suggesting that true manliness consisted in *not* imposing your will on others. The book was not unknown in the United States. Its title was *The Manliness of Christ*.

But if I cavil it is because the book is so good it invites further reflection. Much of what I have said about the blurring of the self is not so much criticism as a different way of saying very similar things. Leverenz has written an excellent book, one full of illuminating detail, bold argument, and good prose. The literary analysis will be interesting to intellectual and cultural historians; the gender analysis suggestive not only for them but for social historians as well. Most of us would be more than happy to accomplish this much.

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1. S. Margaret Fuller, *Literature and Art* (1852), p. 38. Griswold is quoted by Fuller.

2. Robert Ferguson, *America during and after the War* (1866), p. 271; James F. Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, 2 vols. (1840) 1:478.

3. Margaret Fuller. "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women. *The Dial* 4 (July 1843): 43; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Samuel H. Beer, ed. (1955), pp. 10, 13.