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# Enabling Men in Literature: Teaching Male-Positive Masculinities in a College English Class

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*Abstract: Recent concern about the education of boys and men is certainly justified. Masculinities; those various, sometimes competitive, masculine identities; are often misrepresented in American culture leaving many boys and men feeling alienated and excluded from their learning and living communities. A new acute attentiveness to discourses about boys, men, and masculinities and how they are inscribed without question in our culture is timely and auspicious. Teaching a male-positive literature class can intervene in and contribute positively to the education of boys and men by enabling them to become embodied literate learners and leaders, to become men in literature. Sustaining this male-positive strategy of acute attentiveness and positive intervention, my research answers four interrelated questions: Are American boys and men poorly served by education? What opportunities for undertaking a male-positive approach to education and literacy are evident in current scholarship? How successful was my Men in Literature course in enabling male literacy? What male-positive strategies might better enable men in literature and literacy?*

Keywords: Male Positive, Masculinities, Men in Literature, College

**R**ECENT CONCERN ABOUT the education of boys and men is certainly justified. Masculinities; those various, sometimes competitive, masculine identities; are often misread in American culture leaving many boys and men feeling alienated and excluded from their learning and living communities.<sup>1</sup> The potentially detrimental consequences of this misconstruing for boys, men, their families, and their greater communities has deservedly troubled commentators and educators; many of whom have noted that this situation results from an indifference, or even a hostility, to

masculinities in our culture which is fostered by our institutions.<sup>2</sup> This new “acute attentiveness” to these discourses about boys, men, and masculinities; and how they are “inscribed” in our culture as “the unquestioned, often acknowledged *given* of the culture”; is timely and auspicious.<sup>3</sup> Educators play an important role in this process of inscription and have a critical opportunity to intervene positively in these discourses. Many boys do not benefit as much as they could from school, and men are increasingly underrepresented in undergraduate and graduate education. These deficits adversely affect men, their

<sup>1</sup> When I presented this paper at *The Fifteenth International Conference on Learning*, many of those audience members who expressed an interest were educators who knew little about masculinities and men’s issues. For their benefit I have included several informational footnotes aimed at introducing them to the field and its debates. The plural form, *masculinities*, customarily acknowledges men’s multiple identities, yet it also invites socio-political analysis. Herbert Sussman, for example, distinguishes “the social construction of what at any historical moment marked as ‘masculine’” inherent in masculinities from “the biological determinants” emphasized by Men’s Studies” (*Victorian* 8); Harry Brod asserts that “‘Masculinities’ is intended to call attention to the need for men’s studies to move beyond race and class biases,” urging care about uncovering unexamined, naturalized assumptions about men (12); R. W. Connell cautions that “Recognizing multiple masculinities . . . risks taking them for alternative lifestyles, as matter of consumer choice”; instead he suggests that “A relational approach makes it easier to recognize the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed, the bitterness as well as the pleasure in gendered experience,” that “two types of relationship—hegemony, domination/subordination and complicity on the one hand, marginalization/authorization on the other—provide a framework in which we can analyze specific masculinities” (*Masculinities* 76, 81). I did not discuss conflict among masculinities in my course, and I did not directly address race and class. As I note below, some scholars have done excellent work examining race, class, and masculinities in education.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the commentary about contemporary issues facing boys and men by David von Drehle, Joe Manthey et al., and Megan Rosenfeld, see *Understanding and Raising Boys*; see also the scholarly works by Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young.

<sup>3</sup> I have quoted, and learned much, from Annette Kolodny’s perceptive essay:

At the same time that women writers were being reconsidered and reread, male writers were similarly subjected to a new feminist scrutiny. The continuing result—to put years of difficulty [sic] analysis into a single sentence—has been nothing less than an acute attentiveness to the ways in which certain power relations, usually those in which males wield various forms of influence over females, are inscribed in the texts (both literary and critical) that we have inherited, not merely as subject matter, but as the unquestioned, often unacknowledged *given* of the culture. (146-147)

I believe that male-positive scholarship and pedagogy should be similarly attentive to those power relations in texts (be they literary, scholarly, or popular) whose often-unquestioned assumptions about boys and men inform our culture and its practices.



families, and our society; however, a male-positive approach to boys' and men's education could help males succeed as productive, accountable students, partners, parents, and citizens.

To be male-positive is to celebrate masculinities, to be gay affirmative, and to be pro-women.<sup>4</sup> Male-positive research into current representations of boys, men, and masculinities should examine with an acute attentiveness the ways in which the interests of those researchers and policy makers involved in producing texts on contemporary gender issues are inscribed in texts concerning men, boys, and masculinities that we have inherited as the unquestioned, often unacknowledged given of our culture. In addition, this research could explore opportunities, and develop strategies, that better serve boys and men. Male-positive pedagogy could encourage men and their women allies to celebrate diverse masculinities present in society and its culture, to be gay affirmative, and to be pro-women while negotiating responses to artifacts that foreground problematic issues of gender and privilege (particularly when they contribute to misogyny and misandry, defined by the *OED* as "The hatred of males; hatred of men as a sex.") Teaching a male-positive literature class can intervene, in and contribute positively to, the education process by enabling boys and men to become literate learners and leaders, to become men in literature. Enacting the male-positive strategy of acute attentiveness and positive intervention, my qualitative research answers four interrelated questions: Are American boys and men poorly served by education? What opportunities for a male-positive approach to education and literacy are evident in current scholar-

ship? How successful was my Men in Literature course in enabling male literacy? What male-positive strategies might better enable men in literature and literacy?<sup>5</sup>

My investigation into whether American boys and men are poorly served by education involved examining data concerning their experience with educational institutions and comparing them with data about girls and women. These data clearly show that girls and women are outperforming boys in education. Institutional support from corporate, bureaucratic, and academic feminist advocates has successfully seen to that (see, for example the American Association of University Women report on girls' performance in education; published in May, 2008); however, this success seems inadvertently to have contributed to a tacit acceptance of misandry in our culture and an indifference to or a misreading of boys' and men's educational needs.<sup>6</sup> Many American boys are not benefiting from school; what results is their alienation from their communities and even their death. Megan Rosenfeld observes that compared to girls American school boys "are far more likely to be told they have learning disabilities, to be sent to the principal's office, to be given medication for hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder, to be suspended from high school, to commit crimes, to be diagnosed as schizophrenic or autistic" (A1). In fact boys comprise two thirds of special-education students; they are five times more likely to be classified as hyperactive; they are four-to-five times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD; they are thirty percent more likely to fail or drop out of school.<sup>7</sup> Many boys will graduate from high school without being able

<sup>4</sup> My definition derives from Michael Flood's, given in *XY* magazine:

To be male-positive is to be affirming of men and optimistic about men; to believe that men can change; to support every man's efforts at positive change. To be male-positive is to build close relations and supportive alliances among men. It is to acknowledge men's many acts of compassion and kindness. To be male-positive is to resist feeling hopeless about men and writing men off, and to reject the idea that men are somehow intrinsically bad, oppressive or sexist.

Flood adds that being male positive also means being "gay affirmative," which usefully challenges homophobic forms of hegemonic masculinity, and "pro-feminist." While I agree with the anti-essentialist, positive spirit of Flood's definition, mine differs from his in two important ways. First, I substitute the term "pro-women" for "pro-feminist," and I do this for two reasons: it avoids the male-marginalizing gynocentric freight that burdens much of the feminist-based scholarship I discuss below and because the term I use is more inclusive—declaring its support for all women regardless of their credos. (This substitution also addresses the fact that the vast majority of my female students do not identify themselves as feminists.) Second, I leave the choice of whether to change, or how to change, up to men themselves. (Flood would have men become pro-feminist.) I believe that supporters of male-positive masculinities should consider playing a responsible role in their families, communities, and societies. They should be willing to negotiate with diverse groups—such as feminists or members of various men's movements (be their agendas mythopoetic or pro-feminist)—to find common ground to create a better society for all. This negotiation process is important because although men and women have the right to strive for what they want, they do not have the right to dictate what they want others to be.

<sup>5</sup> I mean *qualitative* in its broad sense, as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin 17).

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Gordon defines *corporate feminism* as an individualized, consumerist rather than collective "brand of feminism designed to sell books and magazines, three-piece suits, airline tickets, Scotch, cigarettes" (142). On the relationship between feminism and misandry in popular culture see Nathanson and Young *Spreading* chapter eight; on this relationship in academic and political culture see *Legalizing* chapter ten.

<sup>7</sup> See "Boys in School" *Understanding and Raising Boys*.

to read proficiently.<sup>8</sup> Boys commit suicide five, or by some claims six times more often than girls do; they are eighty-five percent of completed suicides.<sup>9</sup> This tragedy suggests that boys are not sufficiently being supported and taught strategies to help them cope with living in our society, which is surely a primary goal not only of their caregivers, but also of their educators. Higher education also serves American men selectively and poorly. In 2003 approximately fifty-one percent of women (between ages eighteen to twenty-four) were enrolled in college versus forty-one percent of men.<sup>10</sup> According to the above-mentioned American Association of University Women report; women have earned more bachelors degrees than men since 1982, and women earned fifty-eight percent of all of the bachelors degrees conferred in 2005-2006.<sup>11</sup> College-age men are undeserved by career centers and health services, and they commit suicide more often than college women do.<sup>12</sup> This data on the failure of colleges to support vulnerable male student seems counterintuitive to pervasive, feminist-informed beliefs about male privilege. In fact, college admission administrators concerned about their failure to recruit and retain students have been discussing how to implement a form of affirmative action for men—a move to acknowledge what Harry Dawe, Assistant Director of Admissions at Oberlin College, has called the “issue that dare not speak its name,” acknowledging the dismissive attitude of his colleagues who considered men “an already privileged, if not oppressing group.”<sup>13</sup> The data, however, suggest men are increasingly marginalized in higher education and critically so in certain fields crucial to education and literacy. Women earn fifty-five percent of all graduate degrees.<sup>14</sup> They earn fifty-eight percent of all master’s degrees and the majority of Ph.D.s in several fields that depend on those literacy and interpersonal skills

that educators fail to provide boys in school: anthropology (fifty-five percent), communications (fifty-seven percent), education administration (sixty-two percent), English (fifty-eight percent), industrial and organizational psychology (fifty-four percent), psychology (sixty-four percent), and sociology (sixty-one percent).<sup>15</sup> American boys and men are poorly served by education; however, attentive male-positive scrutiny of how masculinities are inscribed in education and intervention into the crucial area of male literacy might usefully contribute to improving this situation.

What opportunities for a male-positive approach to education and literacy are evident in current scholarship? My preliminary research suggests that many qualitative and quantitative studies of gender issues base their analysis on feminist or profeminist beliefs only and do not seriously consider boys and men’s needs. The qualitative research I examined seems to be based on two acknowledged assumptions: first, the impact on girls of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell’s phrase for systemic male domination and female subordination) trumps any consideration of boys’ needs and second, the choice for praxis is constructed as one between progressive feminism (or feminisms), usually brought about by educators and femocrats, and a regressive or masculinist “backlash” against it (Connell 77).<sup>16</sup> The quantitative researchers I studied, however, do not declare their assumptions; they unquestioningly rely on feminist-based suppositions when interpreting their data.<sup>17</sup> The following brief analysis of six exemplary qualitative and quantitative studies will demonstrate that although this research is of limited benefit to boys and men and often misrepresents them, it does afford possible interventions for undertaking a male-positive approach to education.

<sup>8</sup> See David von Drehle.

<sup>9</sup> See Megan Rosenfeld and Joe Manthey. The data on boys’ suicide completion is from “Helping America’s Boys” *Understanding and Raising Boys*.

<sup>10</sup> See Vaishali Honawar.

<sup>11</sup> See Corbett et al. 55 and 62.

<sup>12</sup> Gar E. Kellom presents this data on college men and services. Concerning the suicide, Kellom cites a 2002 study by W. H. Courtenay, D. R. McCreary, and J. R. Merighi, “Gender and Ethnic Differences in Health Beliefs and Behaviors” *Journal of Health Psychology*. 7 (3) 219-231.

<sup>13</sup> Dawe is quoted in “Notebook” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47.8 (20 October 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See “Boys in School” *Understanding and Raising Boys*.

<sup>15</sup> Kellom cites the data for master’s degrees, Paula England et al. those for doctorates. Corbett et al. note that women earned “about half of first professional and doctoral degrees (50 and 49 percent, respectively) in 2004-2005” (55).

<sup>16</sup> Bob Lingard defines *femocrats* as “bureaucratic workers...who were employed because of their feminist politics and commitment to achieving feminist goals through state action” (35). *Masculinism* is understood to be anti-woman. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English define it as “by its nature external to women, capable of seeing them only as ‘others’ or aliens” (17). Victor J. Seidler, resists “talking in terms of a masculinist theory” because “feminist writers such as Ehrenreich and English use the term ‘masculinism’ to refer to a particular form of male supremacy” that “carries inherently oppressive implications, and so is not a sort of companion term to ‘feminism’” (201). R. W. Connell’s *Masculinities* argues this feminist case well. Martin Mills’ essay cogently presents a discussion of the perceived backlash against feminism.

<sup>17</sup> To avoid cumbersome syntax, unless the context of the discussion necessitates, I shall use the term *feminist* to include pro-feminist, corporate feminist, and women-centered positions and agendas.

Although it acknowledges but does not explore alternative points of view, qualitative research by Zoë Gill, Bob Lingard, and Martin Mills generally depends on the two above-mentioned acknowledged gynocentric assumptions.<sup>18</sup> Gill maps out recent discussions of boys and education among those whom she considers “feminist policy activists and academics” who “challenge hegemonic masculinity,” and “the mainstream media, politicians, and other academics” many of whom practice “recuperative masculinity politics” (defined Lingard as “a masculinity politics which constructs men as the ‘victims of feminism’ and which wants to return to a societal arrangement perceived to have existed prior to feminist politics”) (Gill 107, Lingard 33). (Lingard offers a similarly informative description of Australian “masculinity politics” which he identifies as either “recuperative” or “progressive” depending on whether they support feminism (41).) Gill seems annoyed that the report she critiques “keep[s] the focus on boys” because doing so “sidestep[s] girls’ indicators of disadvantage” (144). We see a similar tendency to shift any discussion of boys’ needs and masculinities to girls’ disadvantage and feminism in Mills’ and Lingard’s arguments as well. All assume that hegemonic masculinity necessitates or licenses an imperative to talk primarily about girls and feminisms. Mills, for example, considers the idea of increasing the number of male teachers, as positive role-models for boys, as “problematic” because “the attitudes of some male teachers can work to reinforce those forms of masculinity which are oppressive to women and girls, and some men and boys” and “unfortunately, it is often men who are less likely to adopt pro-feminist positions on gender who are considered to be ideal role models for boys” (65). These concerns are based on assumptions that essentialize men as oppressive and anti-feminist (do we know for certain that these attitudes are held by more male educators than female educators?) and privilege gynocentrism (boys seem to play second fiddle to women and girls). Lingard admirably asserts, “All committed to social justice would be concerned over the male youth suicide rates and the often-destructive risk taking behaviours of many young men,” and although he rightly proposes “[c]hallenging hegemonic masculinities in schools” “and a need to change boys,” he insists that these should occur within a “(pro)feminist” framework (51, 43).<sup>19</sup> Gill maintains that girls be acknowledged as a group disadvantaged

“*at present*” in a society dominated by hegemonic masculinity (119). Boys, on the other hand, should not be considered as a disadvantaged group requiring attention because they “benefit from the ‘masculine dividend’”—her phrase for Connell’s “patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Gill 119, Connell 79). She and Mills seem to suggest that boys should just endure disadvantages they experience because they are, after all, not worse off than girls; they should, as Mills argues, consider the possibility that their “traumas and pain” are not “the result of oppression, but a consequence of privilege” (Gill 119, Mills 67). (How might advice of this sort help a troubled, possibly suicidal, boy or young man?) Boys might not be doing as well as girls, but they are not victims because girls and women are greater victims. Because they argue from a position that reserves victimhood for girls and women and posits itself as the viable alternative, scholars of this bent seem to think that seeing boys as disadvantaged or as victims potentially leads to an acceptance of “recuperative masculinities discourse” and “backlash politics” (Gill 109; Lingard 39-40).

Male-positive educators have an opportunity to intervene in and contribute to the conversation by questioning assumptions made about the nature of hegemonic masculinity and its beneficiaries.<sup>20</sup> For example, do women benefit from hegemonic masculinity? Is there a hegemonic feminism that dominates education theory and practice? To what extent does the assumption that boys benefit from a “patriarchal dividend” instil prejudice against them and deny them educational resources? To what extent might educational strategies, informed by feminisms, mask misogyny? In addition, male-positive educators might question those assumptions about privilege behind certain feminists’ correlation of boys’ and men’s victimhood with backlash politics. These educators might negotiate with all teachers to find ways for boys and girls, with different or complementary learning needs and styles, to learn from a position of discursive parity in an environment where assumptions about sex and gender privilege do not license students’ exclusion and alienation from education.

Like the qualitative scholarship discussed above, the quantitative research I examined; by Paula England et al., David Knox et al., and Kyong Hee Chee et al.; tends to privilege women and ignore men. In

<sup>18</sup> The OED defines *gynocentric* as “Centered on, dominated by, or concerned exclusively with women; taking a female or a feminist point of view.”

<sup>19</sup> Lingard observes, “Indeed, I have been involved in a couple of state department of education committees whose sole purpose was to create arguments for convincing the Minister that there was no need for a specific boys’ schooling policy in Queensland and arguing a case that boys’ issues should be dealt with within a (pro)feminist gender equity network” (43).

<sup>20</sup> A useful point of departure would be Connell and Messerschmidt’s rethinking of hegemonic masculinity and the agency of women: they note that, “bourgeois women may appropriate aspects of hegemonic masculinity in constructing corporate or professional careers (847). An investigation into whether some corporate feminists might exemplify hegemonic femininity might be productive.

their discussion of those gender issues that might explain an increasing female dominance in doctorate programs, England et al., for example, speculate that men are underrepresented because of “feminization,” which they do not satisfactorily define. Although the authors discuss women’s positive motivation for entering higher education, they do not consider men’s positive motivation for doing so.<sup>21</sup> Men are acknowledged for what they are not doing, for apparently “avoiding the stigma of being in a field with too many women,” for avoiding “the nonpecuniary stigma for men of being in a field that is ‘too female,’” for their inferred misogyny (25, 38). The authors do concede that “it is possible that more female fields were decreasingly attractive to both men and women for some reason other than sex composition or salary”—but they then discuss this possibility only in the context of methodological concerns. What about other qualitative reasons? What about the potential for misandry in academic departments where most of the students and professors are women or feminists? What about the “possible discrimination in admission to graduate school” against men evident in “economics, English, and mechanical engineering” in the study they cite (38)?<sup>22</sup> It is regrettable that a study concerned with gender published in 2007 ignores men’s motivations and needs and does not thoroughly investigate what it calls “women’s discouragement of men’s entry” into certain academic fields (38).

The studies by Knox et al. and Chee et al. exemplify a FIFO (feminism in, feminism out) approach to explaining issues relevant to boys and men in education, an approach that begs the question.<sup>23</sup> Although these researchers use quantitative methodologies to obtain their data, they rely only on feminist suppositions to interpret that data. Not surprisingly their results privilege women’s experience and tend to marginalize men. Knox et al. conducted a study whose purpose was to examine “the data regarding gender differences in beliefs about men.” Not only was the population skewed in favor of women (“69.9% were women; 30.1 were men”), but their list of six “beliefs commonly held about men” mainly constructed males negatively. This study never questions the assumptions that inform those beliefs about men. The authors concede, ironically, that “These data are [...] quantitative with no qualitative

interviews to buttress or expound on the raw statistics,” ignoring the qualitative anti-male assumptions that frame their study. Chee et al. set out “to [investigate] gender differences in the academic ethic and academic achievement among college students”; however, as soon as they discuss their raw data, they depend on “psychoanalytic feminist theory” by Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan’s “theory of women’s development,” and based on these theorists’ insights they conclude “women are more likely to possess an academic ethic than men.” What about some understanding of men’s development and how poorly education serves them? The value of these FIFO quantitative studies for male-positive masculinities lies in attending to what they suggest about the gendered interests inscribed in the text and what is assumed without proof.

Male-positive scholars have an important opportunity to intervene in and contribute to discourses concerning quantitative studies by exploring how the objective authority of scientific study can be used in support of unquestioned assumptions about boys, men, and masculinities. Thomas Laquer and Emily Martin have published acclaimed cultural studies on how sex and gender assumptions have influenced on science, and their methods and insights could prove useful for similar male-positive studies.<sup>24</sup> Scholarship on gender issues would benefit from an examination of the influence of unquestioned qualitative reasoning on quantitative studies; in addition, male-positive scholarship would benefit from a thorough investigation into men’s positive motivation for entering higher education, a project already usefully begun by Penny Jane Burke, Lois Weis, and Tom Woodin.

Although much qualitative and quantitative research does not sufficiently attend to boys’ and men’s issues, many researchers do, however, acknowledge that boys need help with literacy and with modelling of positive male behavior in an academic environment.<sup>25</sup> Both international and American studies have conclusively shown that girls outperform boys in literacy.<sup>26</sup> A male-positive approach to male literacy would intervene in and provide alternatives to persistent cultural discursive constructions and representations of boys and men based on stereotypically low expectations, what Michael Kehler and Chris Greig call, “familiar stories of old in which boy meets book, boy rejects book, boy finds car, boy be-

<sup>21</sup> See pages 23-24.

<sup>22</sup> England et al. cite Gregory Attiyeh and Richard Attiyeh “Testing for Bias in Graduate School Admissions.” *Journal of Human Resources*. 32:524-48.

<sup>23</sup> My coining of the acronym FIFO obviously alludes to GIGO, or “garbage in, garbage out,” which *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* defines thus: “the fact that a computer can do only what it is programmed to do and is only as good as the data it receives and the instructions it is given.” I do not mean that feminist assumptions that inform research are garbage, but that research that uses feminist assumptions without proof to analyze its data will beg the question.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Laquer’s *Making Sex* and Martin’s *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*.

<sup>25</sup> Concerning boys and literacy see Gill 110-111, 115; Lingard 46-49; Mills 69-70; on the issue of positive modeling of male behavior see Jones and Robinson.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Smith and Jeffery D. Wilhelm (455) provide a concise summary of these findings.

comes a mechanic” (365).<sup>27</sup> While I have no problem with a person choosing to be a mechanic, I wanted all students in my male-positive English class to belong to our academic community, to feel sufficiently comfortable to express themselves and all students—but most notably the male students—to feel confident that they would be able to contribute successfully to the course (many male students at my college dread having to take literature courses). Perhaps a positive experience with literacy in my course would enable the male students to see themselves as competent, or even excellent, students of literature. Several scholars have suggested useful strategies to improve male literacy.<sup>28</sup> Research conducted by Susannah Smith, Michael Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, and Kehler and Greig suggests that boys and men have no problem developing positive, masculine identities as readers; however, boys and men often successfully experience their literacy in a broader context than traditional academic reading and writing. Susanna Smith’s study of the reading habits of young boys suggests that they “make positive connections between masculinity and reading” by using “their non-fiction reading to find out information about their masculine interest area and hobbies” (12). These boys easily assumed the role of “investigators or researchers: they read to find out about facts”; consequently, they gained expertise, “an identity as a knowledgeable person,” and the respect of their peers, “particularly other boys” (14). These boys themselves were able to model a positive masculine literacy that exemplified competence and expertise.

In their study of forty-nine middle- and high-school boys, Smith and Wilhelm similarly observe that boys are often literate but not necessarily academically literate. Boys are often competent in their “literate life outside school”; however, the researchers find that this competence “may not transfer to other contexts, particularly if they are not clearly related”—so “a boy who feels competent in his literate life outside of school (e.g., reading an Internet site on an area of special interest) may not extend that feeling to his literate activity inside of school (e.g. reading a novel in class)” (455). Like the boys in Smith’s study, these “employed literacy in contexts in which they could demonstrate competence,” that is, in areas of personal interest (458). Moreover, their

reading “allowed them to display and develop competence and an identity as an insider of a community of practice” (458). They too could model a positive masculine literacy. The authors note that boys performed poorly on school literacy because the point of the texts and lessons were obscure, and the students felt their endeavors were often not supported by their teachers (460, 459). They were unable to demonstrate competence because they had no clear idea how to do so. Boys were not against reading literature; in fact, they “expressed a nearly unanimous admiration” for a passionate reader in their group (458). The authors conclude that the boys in the study “rejected school literacy although they did not seem to reject literate activity itself,” and they did so “because of the way students encounter literate activity in school” (460-61). The problem, then, is one of school literacy rather than boys’ literacy.

Kehler and Greig similarly critique the current situation of boys and men concerning school literacy. Their detailed ethnographic study usefully enriches the above-mentioned insights about positive male literacy by “broadening the definition of literacy practices to include that of the socially literate self,” which includes the male body (352). They argue that, “social literacy practices provide useful pedagogical entry points for identifying issues embedded in *being* a man and opening dialogues to address masculinity in the classroom” (352). This inclusion presents an opportunity for boys to address a nexus of gender and literacy issues about which they are experts: “Just as students make sense of assigned novels as texts for seeing and re-seeing their own identities and understanding daily experiences, we argue that they similarly use the bodily texts of social interactions for understanding masculinities and femininities” (361). Moreover, this broadened literacy is social in another important sense: boys often felt but had not thought about how they identify masculinity with the male body experience.<sup>29</sup> Boys and men are already well-versed in social literacy, so understanding literacy as an interplay of mind and body might encourage them to incorporate extracurricular reading strategies (how they situate and sustain their identities as expert leaders and skilled athletes, for example) into academic reading tasks if their contexts can be clearly correlated. Adopting this broader understanding of literacy would ensure that boys and men are

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Fletcher *Boy*, Thomas Newkirk “Misreading” and *Misreading*, and Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael W Smith, “Literacy” usefully address cultural stereotypes about boys’ and men’s literacy.

<sup>28</sup> My analysis of boys’ and men’s aspirations, accomplishment, and literacy will not focus on class, race, and sexual orientation per se because my project offers a male-positive framework that all boys, men, and their allies might find beneficial as a departure point for personal and collective growth and research. I encourage and support this kind of research. See Penny Jane Burke and Tom Woodin and Burke for useful examples of feminist-based studies that consider gender, race, and class. See Patrick Dilley for an interesting consideration of sexual orientation as a factor in examining male collegiate identities.

<sup>29</sup> See Connell’s assertion that “[t]rue masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body” (45) and Gilbert and Gilbert’s point that “boys arrive at the literacy classroom . . . already inscribed by expectations and understandings of literacy, schooling, and masculinity” (qtd. in Kehler 362).

embodied readers of various texts, that they successfully become men in literature. The authors conclude that “[t]eachers need to open up and expand or perhaps re-envision boys as readers” (367). Doing so might include insights contributed by all of these scholars: boys easily master literacy when the challenges involved in doing so are clear and when they feel supported. All boys and young men have expertise to contribute to any engagement with broader, embodied social literacy, and educators should encourage them to apply these reading strategies to more conventional academic literacy. Adopting a broader understanding of literacy that attends to how masculinities have been unquestionably inscribed in our culture—particularly our academic culture—and supports boys’ and men’s attempts at writing and rewriting ways of “doing boy” (and man) in literature—will better our understanding of productive classroom practice.<sup>30</sup>

Given this scholarly awareness of male social literacy and these useful suggestions about how one might encourage and support male literacy, how successful was my Men in Literature course in enabling male literacy? I certainly did not have all of this information when I designed the course; much of my research into this topic resulted from my attempts to address issues raised during the progress of the course. In hindsight I believe that by revealing the limitations of my pedagogy and confirming my need to rethink male literacy, the course taught me the value of an embodied social literacy; however, the course also enabled my students to be successful readers and writers of their own experience of masculinities. Some students even resolved to incorporate male-positive reading strategies into their daily routines.

First, here is some information about the students and the course. The twenty-two students, ranging from freshmen through seniors, consisted of sixteen men and six women.<sup>31</sup> The course consisted of three units: first, an introduction to male-positive masculinities, which included an introduction to salient terminology (such as heterosexuality, homosociality, homosexuality, manhood, masculinities, misandry, misogyny, marginalization, stereotyping) and the manhood question (which examines how a boy or a man might grow into and sustain a meaningful, productive, and commendable type of manhood—the historically determined notion of a man’s socially prescribed and contingent identity); second, a survey of how masculinities and the manhood question

feature in English literature; and finally, an introduction to issues important to contemporary masculinities, which included readings on education, media, genital integrity, and fathers’ rights. Assessments consisted of essay questions given in three formative tests and a summative exam. The tests questions were a combination of my and the students’ suggestions; the final exam required them to discuss the most important lesson they had learned from this course. This test format usefully allowed students to frame questions on what was important to them, rather than merely having them repeat back to me my and other authors’ opinions.

Many of the men in the class were relieved when I stressed that this course was not designed to change them, that I merely wanted them to examine some options and consequences of different masculinities. Many women students were relieved that they were not going to have to defend feminist points of view and that the discursive parity inherent in the course would allow them to contribute freely to all discussions. As the course progressed, however, two challenges became evident: first, how to engage students in a meaningful literacy rather than having them merely rehash the content of the course and second, how to acknowledge conflicting views of sex and gender without legitimizing anecdotal examples of misogyny, misandry, and homophobia. The first two units of the course were not particularly successful. The students were interested in learning the terminology and examining how literature has always reflected different masculinities and their attempts to attain and sustain manhood. Their essays suggest, however, that they were not really personally engaged with their work: they were mimicking good student responses to standard academic questions. This happened because I merely introduced the course-specific terminology as yet another component of a conventional literary text-reading protocol: masculinities and the manhood plot as considerations to be studied objectively alongside persona, tone, and theme. In arranging the course in this way I was favoring the kind of school literacy that Smith and Wilhelm critique; consequently, most of the male students were groping unsuccessfully for ways to include their experiences in their essays. I first became aware of the students’ impressive extracurricular literacy when I began listening to their conversations before class: students often discussed in a most exacting and insightful way their training schedules for sports, some team strategies to be ad-

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful for Kehler and Greig’s insight that, “literacy is intended to reflect the social practices involved in the process of inscribing and re-inscribing masculinities” and support their assertion “that young men write and potentially rewrite the cultural scripts of masculinity through a variety of performances and ways of *doing* boy in school” (358). For a discussion of an exemplary literary text for boys that supports this kind of literacy see James Blasingame’s review of Sandy Asher and David L. Harrison’s, *Dude*, an anthology on the theme of “growing up boy” (611).

<sup>31</sup> I would like to thank the students in my fall, 2007 Men in Literature course at Springfield College for permitting me to quote from their work in this paper.

opted in future matches, and arrangements for on-campus social activities. Why was this intelligent and insightful discussion missing from their writing?

The answer to that question became apparent when we began working on the third unit of the course, dealing with issues important to contemporary masculinities. Most students were invested in our discussions; they could relate to the issues addressed by our readings; and their test and final exam essays reflect this interest and commitment. Remarkably, most students wrote about fathers' rights and genital integrity, two very personal issues involving some embodied thinking, and I have chosen to discuss examples in which these students explore correlations between culturally constructed meanings of masculinities and the male body experience.

Eight students in the class wrote sympathetically about fathers' lack of reproductive rights. Several students questioned currently accepted notions of men's active agency in sexual activity that compels them to support a child. Jill notes that "men are forced to give up one third of each paycheck to support the child or else they'll face jail time." Mary similarly asserts that, "it is unfair to expect men to pay child support, especially if they didn't want the child." Roger suggests that "men should be able to have the right to choose whether or not they feel the need to support this child if they chose not to be in its life." I was impressed by their willingness to question this issue in ways I had not considered: students were prepared to accept that a woman had the right to choose whether to carry a child to term; however, most of them thought it most unfair that men had no say in whether they wished to support the child. My students seemed to think that those assumptions underlying pervasive correlations between men as embodied agents in sexuality and their legal obligations might not be in men's best interests and might require reconsideration. Seven students also discussed how fatherhood is devalued in our culture, and their essays dovetailed with the issues concerning media representation discussed by five students: the social consequences of stay-at-home fathers raising children (and mothers feeling momblocked, Victoria Clayton, term for when mothers feel "edged out" of care giving by fathers.) and the media's treatment of the male athletes in the Duke Lacrosse trial drew most attention.<sup>32</sup> On fath-

erhood and momblocking Donald notes that "the father's bond with his children can be just as strong as if mom were there. This issue of 'momblocking' has also affected male values: men are starting to be seen as more compassionate, loving, and involved when it comes to children." Nilda similarly observes, "Over time men have gone from being the primary breadwinner to being the stay at home dad. Personally, I think it's great. Men's values have gone from work to family which is a step in the right direction. Men have no intention of 'momblocking.' They are just simply raising their child." The class discussion and the essays did not become an exercise in men and women competing for victim status; the students were respectful of one another's opinions and did not resort to anecdotal misandry or misogyny in support of their positions, questioning instead whether the media were manufacturing a contentious issue concerning fatherhood.<sup>33</sup>

The students wrote with impressive authority on genital integrity, perhaps the topic that most vividly exemplifies a not-often examined correlation between culturally constructed assumptions about masculinities and the male body. Curiously, two women contributed most of the class discussion on this topic, while the men expressed their engagement with "backchannel responses" (those "short vocal responses" or "head nodding that "display the attentiveness of the listener and include noninterruptive comments") (Helwig-Larson et al. 358). I was initially concerned that the men were silent; I was not sure whether they were uninterested, but my initial concern with the men's silence was allayed when I read the essays. The seven essays on this topic clearly revealed their authors' passionate concern about the ethics of neonatal circumcision. Ivan's remark is typical: "Any surgery or procedure done that is permanent and mutilating, such as circumcision or any body modification, should be their [the boys' or men's] decision." Don concludes, "Under any other circumstances, that type of act would be punishable by law and surely disgraceful." These essays were courageous because it seemed that most students had never really openly questioned why most American boys are circumcised; they now saw how cultural assumptions about their sex were literally inscribed, without their permission, on their bodies. Jarred notes that "the negative consequences of circumcision for

<sup>32</sup> Although only three students chose to write about it, some of the most passionate class discussion of media misrepresentation of men concerned the 2006-2007 rape trial—in both the media and the court—of the Duke Lacrosse players. Both Paul and John discuss the media's (and society's) treatment of these men: Paul notes that, "The objectification of these three white male Lacrosse players has degraded and tarnished their identity to the point where they must hide from the public.... It is because of male stereotypes and the media's selfishness that this had to unfold the way it did." John suggests, "The Duke Lacrosse team worked hard in order to achieve their manhood status when media punished them for having a sense of what it is to be a man. The misrepresentation of facts due to male stereotyping led to the overdramatization of a faulty rape claim. When presented with facts, the media simply overlooked it." What could have degenerated into a misogynistic demonizing of the accuser rather became an emotional and thoughtful consideration of how men were objectified and stereotyped by the media and an examination of society's expectations of men.

<sup>33</sup> Gill (107, 111-12), Mills (62-3, 69), and Lingard (33, 35, 41) give a feminist account of men's status as victims.

males are that it is painful and can take away from sexual pleasure”—a point also noted by Christopher who sums up the feelings of most students: “the only positive effect of having your foreskin ripped off is that you could be a part of an overrated trend . . . that is rapidly going out [of style].” Discussing genital integrity certainly enabled men to acknowledge their bodies and how they felt about violations done to them; moreover, the fluency of these responses confirmed Keller and Greig’s observations about the centrality of the body to male’s experience of literacy.

My failure to provide a framework for discussing conflicting gender issues might explain why only Thomas and Ivan discussed multiple masculinities on the test.<sup>34</sup> When any debate concerning unacceptable masculinities began during class, I usually reminded students that responsible actions and support of different people with different identities were central to male-positive masculinities, and I recognize that my doing so pre-empted a fruitful opportunity for learning about intra-masculinities conflict that a discussion of hegemonic masculinity would have afforded. I was pleased, however, that the course-fostered values of personal dignity, decency, and tolerance of others were evident in the final exam essays. Five students even resolved to incorporate male-positive literacy into their daily lives. Justin, a freshman student, observes,

This class made me realize that the male gender has been given a less reputable stereotype, which they are expected to follow. This I have known, and my entire life, I have learned to accept certain offenses my gender . . . has not earned. The common acceptance by men [of male stereotypes] has put men in a ‘limbo’ in society, in which the issue of men is ignored, or not worthy of consideration. . . . I don’t need to accept offenses against men. I am glad that this has made me stronger, in that I do not accept what society has said about me because I know what I am. I am, however, glad that a stand is being taken, and that someday, people will have to watch what they say around men as well.

Martin remarks, “It is a great thing that men are allowed to be the kind of men they want to be. . . . I am allowed to be me as long as I am not hurting anyone else. I definitely have not planned out my entire life, and it is reassuring to know that it is my choice to do what I want within reason.” Roger and Jane both

resolved to view media portrayal of men more critically: Roger noted he is now “aware of how men are personified in our culture”; furthermore, he adds, “This course broadened my horizons and will let me make my own judgments and opinions on how men are treated throughout society.” Jill similarly remarks, “I now view television shows and commercials differently, and they really do create this dumb, selfish, violent image of men.” She and Paul hope to use what they have learned to affect positive change: she adds, “With this increased awareness and knowledge, we can be part of a new generation that can change the media’s portrayal of men.” Paul asserts, “This course opened a new door in my learning experience, in which I better understand my part as a man and what I can contribute to society.” These students resolved to live responsibly as male-positive members of our society; in addition, some determined to work at changing our society for the better. I am pleased to share a learning and living community with them.

Based on my experience of teaching *Men in Literature*, I offer the following male-positive strategies that might better enable male literacy and men in literature:

- *Concerning male literacy*: **First**, encourage students to apply their expertise as socially literate readers to academic literacy by introducing Mark Johnson’s five “dimensions” of the body and discussing ways in which our embodied understandings of academic and extracurricular issues are filtered through them (278, 274-278). **Second**, actively encourage “stereotype disconfirming” by “providing [examples] of male achievement” in literacy (Williams) and by mentoring male-positive colleagues and future teachers.
- *Concerning my Men in Literature course*: **First**, introduce, in unit one, the relevant terminology for discussing gender issues in the context of Mark Johnson’s embodied understanding noted above. **Second**, acknowledge and incorporate into the class what Newkirk calls the “distinct culture of boys,” whose characteristics include “the affection for parody and action, interest in professional sports, cartoons, [and] video games,” and accept that “writers do innovate within stereotypical male genres” (“Misreading” 299). For example, Leo Braudy’s discussion of honor, heroism, and the warrior’s spirit and body might usefully frame a survey of literature about masculinities and attaining manhood whose assignments might include inventing games and creat-

<sup>34</sup> Thomas asserts, “Men should have the right to multiple masculinities. This law would simply abolish male stereotypes. This male-positive approach would announce that there are many ways to be a ‘real’ man even if it is not the classic strong, emotionless, brave man who knows he is as much of a man as Rambo himself. It also allows the child in the store to get his pink bike and not feel strange or weird about it.” Ivan notes that, “Men need to be able to be who they truly are. If that’s the jock, fine. If it is the smart genius who doesn’t like conflict, that should be fine. As long as they aren’t hurting others, they should be able to be who they are, not pressured to be someone else.”

ing graphic stories. **Third**, include two new topics in unit three: first, a discussion of Connell's analysis of hegemonic masculinity to encourage some discussion on conflict among masculinities (including, perhaps, a consideration of Kathleen E. Miller's research on jocks and athletes) and second, an examination of non-heterosexual identities (based, perhaps, on Dilley's research) that respectfully acknowledges marginalized masculinities by encouraging "collective stories" of different men's experiences (Pringle 216).

My Men in Literature course challenged and rewarded us. All students learned about male-positive masculinities and its usefulness as an analytical tool. I feel, also, that the course enabled men in literature: it both encouraged them to see themselves as active participants in understanding, defining, and incorporating male-positive masculinities into our college

community, and it acknowledged them as embodied men, as agents of a broader literacy, at the college. Michael Kimmel observes that,

To be a college *for* men requires an engagement not only with the males of the species but also with the thoughts such creatures have rolling around in their heads about the meaning of that anatomy. To engage men in higher education requires that we begin to think about how to integrate masculinities into the collegiate experience of men—in the classroom, in extracurricular programming, in residential life" (100).

In other words, we as educators need to engage men in those areas where education has too often poorly served men, with negative consequences for our society. For those of us who teach English we can start by enabling men in all of our literature classes.

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