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Man-made Fibres? The Split Personalities of Victorian Manliness

Ruth Robbins

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Abstract

This essay investigates the textual traces of a split that was central to the Victorian conception of manliness: the contradiction of gentlemanliness which demanded both the capacity to commit violence and the requirement to be ‘civilized’. It suggests that there is a fault line running through the fabric of masculinity which can be seen in the texts which train boys to become men, which remember and reconstruct that training and which consider manliness in its mature forms. A man is a subject who acts; he is also subjected to forces which he does not control. In fiction, long and short, and in poetry, masculinity is repeatedly shown to be both contested and constructed – a man-made fibre, not a natural or god-given status. From Tennyson to Wilde, there is a tear in the cloth.

Keywords: Victorian manliness and masculinity; gentlemanliness; Alfred Tennyson; Charles Dickens; Rudyard Kipling; Saki (H. H. Munro); Oscar Wilde; Robert Louis Stevenson.

Near the beginning of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the unnamed narrator comments on the novel’s protagonist, the sailor Marlow, that ‘Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted)’ (Conrad 9). I begin here because the ‘spinning of yarn’ is a metaphor of textuality which is also a metaphor about the fabrication of the text. (Text itself, of course, derives from the Latin word ‘textus’ – network, weaving, fabric or cloth.) The spinner of yarns is potentially the teller of tall tales. And this essay is concerned with a series of acts of what might be called ‘fabrication’. The textual metaphor of Charlie Marlow’s tale-telling – spinning yarn – is, in fact, far from atypical for the Victorians told themselves a great many stories about masculinity of which *Heart of Darkness* is a key late example. But

the connotations of yarn spinning are that these are tall stories, ‘made up’ and embroidered. The contrast between the bluff sailor who is practical and efficient and the colonial administrator, Kurtz, is one which the period retextured in different forms across the nineteenth century, as both comedy and tragedy. What many of these versions of the making of a man suggest, I want to argue, is that dark doubles often haunt the apparently confident assertions of the seamless fabric of proper masculinity and similar tropes and concerns can be seen across a very wide period. Moreover, this troubled doubling can be found everywhere – in texts which offer models of masculinity for young readers; in texts which reconstruct masculine training in the fictional memoirs of a mature man’s youth; and in texts which focus on the mature male as he acts in the world. The wholeness, or integrity, which is meant to be the end point of a young man’s growing-up story is contested – there is a split at the seams.

This was evident right from the start of the Victorian period, and, indeed, from before its real beginning. In a poem probably composed around 1833, and published in 1842, Alfred Tennyson presented in a dramatic monologue a central problem of masculinity for the Victorian age. The poem is ‘Ulysses’ and it speaks to a profound dualism at the heart of what it means to be a man. The poem imagines Odysseus’ homecoming from his adventures in Troy and the Mediterranean basin to Ithaca as a profoundly disappointing return to the domestic realm. The returned king finds himself useless, role-less, unmanned, by his ‘still hearth, among these barren crags’. By juxtaposition he also implies that his wife’s charms are equally barren and craggy, so that one of the key affective compensations of homecoming is reduced to nothingness. Ulysses addresses a group of his mariners with the exhortation to give up the dubious pleasures of home in favour of a life of continuing adventure ‘beyond the sunset [. . .] and the western stars’ (ll. 59–60). He may not be quite the man he was when he was the hero of the *Iliad*, a man who ‘strove with gods’ (l. 53). But sailing into the sunset to death is preferable to ministering to his ‘savage race,/That hoard, and sleep, and know not

me' (ll. 4–5). Better to go out in a blaze of glory than to settle for the mere administration of an ungrateful kingdom where the king's public reputation for heroism is reduced to nullity.

Ulysses knows, however, that he does have duties that are at home. He deliberately abdicates these responsibilities, and his throne, to his son whom he characterises, in very ambivalent terms, as far better suited to the diurnal management of his lands:

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle –
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred on the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine. (ll. 33–43)

The contrast between father and son is absolute. Ulysses may claim Telemachus as his 'own', and declare he loves his son, but he also insistently draws out the opposition between the two of them, especially in that telling conclusion that 'He works his work, I mine'. There are, in this poem, another set of 'separate spheres' apart from the ones traditionally associated with men (public duty, work, reputation) and women (domesticity, caring duties, privacy): he elucidates the opposition between the men who *do*, and the men who *manage* – between colonial conquerors and the administrators who operate the empire when conquest is complete, between soldiers and civil servants whose civilising mission is anything but heroic. Telemachus is imaged as having a rather different skill-set from his father, and although the

ageing warrior king professes a kind of admiration for these attributes, expressing confidence that his son will be successful in his much smaller quest, the language in which he does so has a subtext that borders on contempt for what the younger man represents. The son is prudent, 'blameless' because he takes no risks, and frankly unheroic in his devotion to 'common duties', decency, and relations based on 'offices of tenderness'. He may keep the home fires burning in front of his father's household gods, but he is almost effeminate in his particular version of the masculine sphere. He will never be half the man his father was. He is not an immortal hero in the traditional terms by which male heroism is understood and will not achieve immortality through astonishing battle feats, adventures with the supernatural and a talent for cunning violence. The problem of Victorian manhood is rolled up into these two figures, Ulysses and Telemachus. A man's place, as John Tosh has shown, is located between at least two worlds, broadly the public and the domestic. His restatement of the separate spheres debate – 'Men make their living and their reputation in the world; women tend the hearth and raise the children (1999: 1) – is quickly dismissed as simplistic: 'For most of the nineteenth century,' he writes, 'home was widely held to be a man's place, not only in the sense of being his possession or fiefdom, but also as the place where his deepest [affective or emotional] needs were met' (1). The literary record points to the discomfort of this view and Tennyson's poem is a very strong early example of this tendency. Father and son embody in separate personalities the demands of each arena; and for lesser mortals the requirement is to live appropriately in both worlds. In the words of Glennis Byron, in Tennyson's poem:

it is not just the structure of difference created by the masculine and the feminine which is at issue, but also structures of difference created by the emergence of competing masculinities [. . .] a multiplicity of male gender formations began to emerge in the nineteenth century, beginning with the crucial shift away from aristocratic ideals of manliness to bourgeois ideals of duty and self-regulation. The

traditional male heroic figure of [. . .] Ulysses is set not only against the domestic figure of Penelope, but also against the new bourgeois ideal of duty and control as embodied in the son Telemachus. (Byron 70–1)

‘Ulysses’ may be set long ago and far away, but as is typically the case with dramatic monologues in the early Victorian age, it is also a displaced commentary on the contemporary, charting a fault line in the make-up of nineteenth-century masculinity, a split that appears to have become increasingly acutely felt as the century neared its end, evidenced in a wide range of *fin-de-siècle* cultural productions. The skills necessary for conquest are simply not the same as those required to administer new territories, those required for business are at odds with those of family life, and definitions of manliness that depend on a public reputation for self-reliance, integrated ‘character’, physical prowess, sincerity and mental agility under pressure might not do you much good when it comes to the more everyday world, whether at home or in the empire. Nonetheless, in Tennyson’s poem the father’s grudging acknowledgement of his son’s attributes speaks of a set of shared values that were to a very large extent assumed to be the virtues of a man. (Virtue itself originally meant manliness, from the Latin word *vir* – a man.) These values include labour, whether heroic or mundane, and a scarcely disguised contempt for women who are kept out of most of this version of the story of the making of manhood. (Where women are present, their role is minor but also a site of struggle and resistance.) Much later, when the same fault line is re-imagined by Kipling, for example, at the end of the period, in poems such as ‘If’ (1895/1910) or ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (1899) – which are popular precisely because of their apparent assertion of an unproblematic masculine ideal – the rhetoric exposes an unconscious discomfort with the ostensible message. The burden of the civilising mission of empire that is at the heart of ‘The White Man’s Burden’ really is a burden – it is a demand for heroic, but ultimately pointless self-sacrifice: it may not after all be better to sail into the never-setting

sun of imperial adventure because the natives are not grateful, and the men who take up the burden, ‘the best’ of European and American sons, die in the midst of their efforts. ‘If’ is similarly a very peculiar production if its intention was to persuade its readers to the ideal focused on disinterested effort towards an abstract calling. Often read as a confident display of imperial masculine values, there is an alternative possibility written into its fabric. It could, after all, be simply paraphrased as saying: if you can do seven impossible things before breakfast, then, and only then, you’ll be a man, my son. This ideal of manliness certainly exceeds any real man’s grasp, and one has to wonder if it is really meant to be read ‘straight’ as an exemplar of a particular quasi-official public rhetoric about masculine character, or if it is open to a much more ironic interpretation. What draws together Tennyson and Kipling, though, is that they both focus their attention on versions of manhood that eschew the domestic – which split the self away from affectionate ties of family in favour of comradeship between men. The importance of ‘If’ in part resides in the fact that it deals with the multiple selves a man must be. There may not be much of a domestic ideal in the poem and relationships with women are pointedly absent from its exhortations. But the strength required for public duty, which may be located in heroic deeds or in the swallowing of pride, which might be about a public reputation, or about the private satisfaction of knowing that a job has been well done, all suggest that the manliness it extols is a pretty complicated, and largely artificial, business. It is man-made because, as the very existence of the poem attests, it has to be *taught* and learned – it is not natural at all. This means that the messages about the contradictions at the heart of manliness are part of the wider culture, and especially infect a literary culture which was part of a young man’s training. The split, though, whatever the broader intentions of that culture, often shows.

It was a tension which, as Joseph Bristow has observed, was central to the kinds of educational literary (and to the frankly entertaining) texts aimed at young male readers in the

latter part of the nineteenth century. The domain of this fiction, he writes, was ‘based on emotional extremes of protecting and fighting’ (Bristow 40) and the fictions published in such venerable organs as the *Boys’ Own Paper* brought together ‘selected aspects of imperialist ideology – aggressive, competitive, and yet gentlemanly behaviour’ (41) in sometimes startling juxtapositions. And for Mark Girouard, these contradictions are manifested in the ideal of chivalry, adapted for nineteenth-century use – a code of conduct which ‘accepted fighting as a necessary and indeed glorious activity, but [which] set out to soften its potential barbarity by putting it into the hands of men committed to high standards of behaviour’ (16) derived in part from Christianity and eventually given new life by the immense popularity of the historical fictions of Sir Walter Scott.

‘If’ acknowledges that manhood might involve more than one conception of an idealised masculine self. In its admission of the complexity of masculinity, it shares an interest in manliness that is investigated and exposed in a wide range of textual artefacts across the century. In making this assertion I am aware of the danger of failing to see the historical specificity of particular moments of nineteenth-century cultural formations. The 1840s were not the same as the 1890s any more than the 1940s were the same as the 1990s. If, however, the term ‘Victorian’ has a continuing critical usefulness, it derives in part from the continuities between the various different generations that made up the ‘long’ Victorian age – that is, roughly from 1830 to around 1910 or 1914. There are differences in emphasis in the fabrication of masculine identities between the various decades; the multiplicity of masculinity was imagined at different points as comic or as terrifying with all the shades in between. But it is my contention that there is a repeated sense of fissure which, even with the differences that passing time made, troubled the notion of an indivisible individual’s integrity and wholeness, and which implied that manliness was a contested cultural category as well as a potentially troubled state of being. Following John Tosh, who is himself following H. L.

Malchow, we can certainly conceive of late-nineteenth-century manliness as a complex of “layered identities” corresponding to home, club, office, chapel and so on’ (Tosh, *A Man’s Place* 140). Tosh uses the example of William Hale White’s autobiographical novel *Mark Rutherford’s Deliverance* (1885) as an example of a split personality that attained masculinity requires: ‘I cut off my office life [. . .] from my life at home so completely that I was two selves’, Rutherford recalls of his early married life in the 1850s, ‘so that my true self was not stained by contact with my other self’ (*A Man’s Place* 140). This sense of a doubleness that has to be managed was also part of mid-century fictions, with Dickens’s Wemmick (*Great Expectations* 1860–1) acting as the most extreme example of an alienated labourer in the new industrial metropolis. His domestic virtues, embodied by his tenderness for his Aged Parent, are not in doubt but they are kept resolutely separate from his work in the mire of criminality and violence between the abattoir (based on Smithfield) and the prison and outlaw environs of Little Britain. For Wemmick it is essential that the two sides of his life are kept separate, and he requests that no mention be made of his private home in Walworth in the public world of his work. The split is a physical split too. In the early morning he is domestic and affectionate, but

at half-past eight precisely we started for Little Britain. By degrees, Wemmick got drier and harder as we went along, and his mouth tightened into a post-office again. At last, when we got to his place of business and he pulled out his key [. . .] he looked as unconscious of his Walworth property as if the Castle and the drawbridge and the harbour and the lake and the fountain and the Aged, had all been blown into space together by the last discharge of the Stinger. (Dickens 232)

Wemmick nevertheless does ‘manage’ the split in his personality. He copes with its contradictions, for Dickens imagines this particular social commentary in the form of comedy. There is no sense in which Wemmick is a figure of tragedy or pain, torn between the

splits of fibre of his being, though the comedy also offers an implicit critique of his failure to live up to the masculine ideal of integrity or wholeness. Wemmick is ‘good’, so the split does not matter much; but Dickens also imagines the split in more dangerous terms, in his various hypocrites of which the cringing, very very ‘umble Uriah Heep is the key exemplar, pointing to the danger of the different selves a man must inhabit. The tensions become much less manageable at the end of the century, and are characterised by attempted flights (away from the domestic and into other worlds) or by utter breakdown. The flights are the worlds readers encountered in adventure fiction of various kinds, largely centred on empire at the end of the century; they include the fictions of Haggard and some of the short fiction of Stevenson (alongside, of course, *Treasure Island*, 1885). The breakdowns are the gothic tales of split personalities, where men cannot ‘manage’ the various layers of personality – or what Hayden White defines as the ‘conflict between desire and the law’, which he sees as the motivating force for all narrative (White 12) – and find themselves destroyed by the unbearable tensions that are the result of those conflicts. The most famous examples are Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). That Stevenson wrote in both veins (as did Rudyard Kipling), and that the fictions in both cases use domestic dissatisfaction as a motive for (re)action, suggests that the reasons for the flights and the breakdowns spring from a similar source: the unbearable weight of ‘being’ a man, and of living up to the divided expectations of the role.

The metaphor of layers that Tosh outlines is one that suggests onions, peeled back to some elusive core in nineteenth-century manliness, but it is also potentially a textual/textile metaphor where the costumes of manliness are part of the performance. To mount an investigation of the layers and the training that leads to them, I turn first to two short stories, and thence to the two most famous ‘double-lives’ stories of the *fin de siècle*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The short stories are both

about the children of empire, and they investigate the costs that empire exacts on the emotional development of boys who will become men: the attitudes of the two writers are quite different but both amount to a profound ambivalence about what their boy ‘heroes’ are expected to be and to do. The results of fractured families and the alienation from feminine affection that was a central part of the training of young men, even outside the necessary separations inflicted on the families of colonial administrators, and the damage it potentially does, are played out in Wilde and Stevenson in their stories of layered personalities. The stories both offer examples of masculine training, and reasons for the painfulness of manliness.

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) and Hector Hugh Munro (1870–1916, who wrote under the pen-name Saki) were both children of empire, whose biographies attest to the pain of separation from their parents (exacerbated in Saki’s case by the premature death of his mother) by vast seas in the service of the state. Both writers returned to this theme, which is in some ways profoundly Victorian: orphanhood, whether real or virtual is after all a much repeated trope in nineteenth-century fiction since it permits a particular narrative trajectory which at once provides for vulnerability and threat to the ‘hero’ (or, less often, to the heroine) while also demanding that the child protagonist acts for his or her own protection. Without this trope, narratives of childhood adventure would be rather difficult to construct.

In two short stories, Kipling’s ‘Baa, baa, black sheep’ (1888) and Saki’s ‘Sredni Vashtar’ (1911), the two writers both detail something of the treatment that children of parents working in the Indian army or civil service could expect when they were returned home for reasons of education and their fathers’ working lives in a form of virtual orphanhood. The stories share much in terms of their empathy for their boy-child protagonists who are both precocious but powerless children in the grip of forces that they do

not control or understand. Both stories are concerned with children farmed out to uncomprehending adults and the potentially tragic results of the severing of blood ties.

Saki's is the slighter story and offers much less background to the small boy's story. It is partially autobiographical, relating to Munro's own childhood in the 1870s and 1880s, so, though published after the Victorian period, it draws on Victorian experiences. In the case of Conradin, Saki's boy hero, we know only that his parents are absent and that on the pretext of his poor health the boy is wrapped in restrictive cotton wool (not the cotton wool of spoiling, but that of confinement) by his guardian. Conradin is Munro's alter ego, who lives in uneasy foster care with his cousin, Mrs De Ropp. They are enemies whose enmity is never spoken aloud, suggesting from the outset that part of the training for social life in general, whether masculine or feminine, is hypocrisy:

Mrs De Ropp would never, in her honestest moments, have confessed to herself that she disliked Conradin, though she might have been dimly aware that thwarting him 'for his good' was a duty which she did not find particularly irksome. Conradin hated her with a desperate sincerity which he was perfectly able to mask. Such few pleasures as he could contrive for himself gained an added relish from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian. (Saki 136-7)

Aunts or foster mothers, like the fairy-tale stepmother, are repeated figures of hate in Saki's writing, a repetition which has some interesting implications. The 'unnatural' woman who has not borne her own children, and who dislikes boy children generally because they are disruptive and always on the edge of rebellion, recurs also in other writers of the same period, including Kipling. This may be memory for these two particular writers, both of whom wrote extensively about their feelings of loss when they were separated from their biological mothers and of their hostility towards their 'foster' mothers, but she is such a common figure, and so commonly treated as a hostile and aggressive force in the child's life that it is tempting

to speculate about her meanings. In part, it is the dislike for anyone who exercises control without love. But it is noticeable that the shadowy male figures who sometimes inhabit the foster home are usually treated more sympathetically. Mrs De Ropp has no male consort to leaven her treatment of Conradin. (We do not know what has happened to her husband. The story offers no backstory for her either.) Her behaviour is outwardly appropriate, but casually cruel, as if Saki's narrator sets out to show what happens when women get to rule, even over quite little boys. (Conradin is given no specific age, and could be any age between 6 and 10.)

The boy's response is savage. Using the lessons of an Indian childhood that is merely hinted at and never described, Conradin takes his revenge on his guardian by invoking the spirit of a deadly god called Sredni Vashtar, in reality a ferret who kills his tormentor in answer to the child's pagan prayers. While all around him wonder how to tell the child of the tragedy, the boy, who knows only too well what has happened, calmly butters more toast (one of the many treats his guardian has denied him), supremely indifferent to the vengeance he has unleashed. Despite its violence, this is a comic story in which the powerless become powerful. But the attitude it represents is really important. The cousin has never cared for the boy; the boy therefore does not care about what he has done. The respectable middle-class morality his relative represents is rendered null. The child is a psychopathic monster – or at least he could be. His emotions are so stifled by the inadequacy of care that he has been offered that he has clearly stepped outside the bounds of conventional life. The shades of Algernon's greed for buttered muffins in *The Importance of Being Earnest* reduce the horror to comedy – and the reference is probably deliberate. Saki admired Wilde and uses a version of his amoral dandy figures across a very wide range of his short fiction. As with many of Saki's fictions, though, there is an unsettling residue and it is not butter on one's cuffs. The result of all this in Munro's writing is a series of short stories in which indifference to social propriety is rendered entirely the proper mode of life, and although this is produced in the

mode of satire, its comedy is often extremely close to the knuckle. It is very noticeable that one of the repeated episodes of Saki's fiction is that of the usually anarchic child (of either sex) who takes revenge on the domestic realm of generally odious female relatives, preferably by getting them eaten by wild animals or by domestic animals gone 'rogue'.

In comparison, Kipling's tale is darker and more psychologically realised, and it is not imagined as a comedy or a fantasy of the power of the oppressed over the oppressor. 'Baa-baa black sheep' is a famously autobiographical tale, and it is a great deal more detailed in its charting of the demoralisation of the small boy, Punch (an affectionate nickname from his parents which is twinned with his younger sister's nickname, Judy). Punch has been ripped from his parents' love to a paid-for foster home with an appallingly unsuitable surrogate 'aunt'. In a depiction of a child's egocentrism which predates and predicts Freud's characterisation of early childhood as a state of oceanic bliss (Freud 8), Kipling portrays Punch's 'back story' in some detail. The child of colonial workers, Punch is loved and cherished, not only by his parents but also by a whole army of Indian servants, for whom he is the centre of every attention. The bliss does not last. He is brought back to England, with his little sister Judy, and farmed out to a woman who simply does not understand boy children at all. (She has a son of her own, whom she spoils and who bullies the foster child. Punch, who is cleverer and nicer than her son, is beyond her comprehension.) She interprets his every characteristic as evidence of wickedness, demonises him, dislikes and punishes him at every turn, reprising for a male child the bullying and unkindness that Jane Eyre also suffered. The child has no understanding of what he is meant to have done. When he retaliates he is punished: 'I don't understand', he says, 'wearily' (Kipling 189) because he is punished for being bullied and punished for seeking to avoid it. Like David Copperfield before him, in similar circumstances, the boy turns to books for his comfort, but to such an extent that he almost ruins his eyes; also like Copperfield (and indeed Jane Eyre), he is made

to wear a placard proclaiming his sins. Tragedy is near and Punch plans to do real violence to his tormentors (mother and son), which in this world would be much more serious than the satirical revenge taken by Saki's Conradin, just as the thwarting of Punch is actually much more sadistic and sustained. When pushed beyond endurance he threatens to kill first the son and then the mother, the final straw being when she sets out to make him wear his placard proclaiming he is a liar:

‘If you make me do that’, said Black Sheep very quietly, ‘I shall burn this house down, and perhaps I’ll kill you. I don’t know if I *can* kill you – you’re so bony – but I’ll try.’

No punishment followed this blasphemy though Black Sheep held himself ready to work his way to Auntie Rosa's bony throat, and grip there till he was beaten off. (Kipling 1987: 193)

But the worst outcome is averted by the incidental intervention of a kindly (male) visitor and because Punch's mother returns in the nick of time for her children and realises the damage that has been done to her son. She wins him back with her unconditional love. But although the ending is sentimental, it also contains a warning that the damage done to the fabric of personality in a child can never be completely unpicked and that childhood in such circumstances is a training in duplicity:

when young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Suspicion, and Despair, all the Love in the world will not wholly take away that knowledge; though it may turn darkened eyes for a while to the light, and teach Faith where no Faith was. (197)

This is a warning to the reader about what kinds of stories Kipling will go on to tell. The stories specifically aimed at children are one thing – innocent, kindly, and funny. Those for an adult audience, however, are much more ambiguous. Kipling specialised in the excavation of moral failings, weaknesses and distress. His Indian stories, especially, are told

by a series of narrators who operate in multiple shades of grey as they describe cowardice, superstition, drug abuse, violence, and moral turpitude among those who are meant to be emissaries of light in the empire. The civilisation that the civilising mission is meant to represent is one that Kipling's stories repeatedly show to be empty. What Punch has learned from his experiences is the necessity for hypocrisy, the gap between reputation and motivation, or between desire and the law, on which civilisation apparently rests, the space between what one feels and what one performs.

Hypocrisy is the correlative of a layered identity that requires a man to play different roles in different settings. But it is also the unforgiveable sin for a society that sets such great store on the consistency and sincerity of character as the foundation for manliness and which defines appropriate manliness in terms of a rigid discipline of self-sacrifice to duties, wherever they are found. In the words of James Eli Adams, most of the writing about masculinity in the nineteenth century appealed to a small number of roles – 'the gentleman, the prophet, the dandy, the priest and the soldier' – each of which needs to be understood as 'the incarnation of an ascetic regimen [. . .] [the roles] lay claim to the capacity for self-discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute, and in their different ways embody masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism' (Adams 2). That claim is the public face of masculinity in the terms of its various public, rhetorical constructions. But it is a social law that seems to be incompatible with actual life.

In Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, the relationship between the public face of the gentleman and his actual self is very clearly incompatible. Like the protagonists of the 'memoir' short stories discussed above, Dorian is also an orphaned child, in his case literally so, and he has been brought up by surrogates – the servants in his grandfather's house. There has been no cruelty as such, merely indifference, and it has left him without any moral foundations, which makes him easy prey to the blandishments of Lord Henry Wotton. In their

first encounter, Wotton points out the contradiction in so-called civilised life, arguing that good conduct, paradoxically, is in fact a form of primitive belief:

The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. [. . .] The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself, with desire for what monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. (Wilde 42–3)

The creeds of self-denial, asceticism and conformity to duty have no appropriate function for the modern world. Wotton suggests this heresy, and Dorian is very easily convinced. He begins a career of debauchery, which is his attempt to experience every emotion and action, including (especially) those which are forbidden. He is able to do this because he is leisured. The money he inherits from his family means that he has no need or inclination to work, so he has no public duty to perform: he is a latter-day lotus eater. His only relationship with the public world of masculinity concerns his reputation, and the split he experiences is that between what he appears to be and what he actually is.

In the final confrontation with Basil Hallward before Dorian murders him, Basil appeals to Dorian's better nature as a gentleman, arguing that Dorian's good name is tarnished by a series of near-scandalous activities – ruined friends, women discarded and the hint of other sexual crimes. Basil is, however, a simple soul, who cannot believe that his friend is capable of wrongdoing because he is so beautiful. In a peroration which has the naivety of a fairy tale's morality, he declares that Dorian cannot have done the things he is rumoured to have done, because:

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it

shows itself in the lines of the mouth, the droop of the eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. [. . .] you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth – I cannot believe anything against you. (182–3)

Basil has complete faith in the oneness of his friend – his wholeness and integrity are marked on his body which is the expression of his moral being. Dorian's philosophy, however, is one which takes the split of layered identities fully into account. It leads him to a performance of masculinity which is a series of acts, and renders Dorian insincere rather than straightforward. 'Is insincerity such a terrible thing?' comments the narrator. 'I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities'. And then, in a retreat from saying these things in his own voice, Wilde's narrator ascribes this view to his protagonist:

Such at any rate was Dorian Gray's opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. (174–5)

Dorian's unchanging physical perfection, however, far from being a marker of his moral perfection is a kind of death-in-life. He lacks dynamism – the capacity to develop – because he lives in a world without consequences, and as such, is not a proper man. Because his physical face never changes, he lives trapped in stasis. And at the end of the novel, the final sin that undoes him is hypocrisy. Growing weary of his life of sybaritic pleasure, Dorian decides to reform himself, and against his inclination does not seduce a young country girl. But as Lord Henry Wotton points out, his repentance is not sincere; it is merely the attempt to experience a new kind of sensation, to answer the question of what it feels like to sacrifice an anticipated pleasure. Basil's portrait of Dorian spells this out to him in the final moments

before he stabs it, with fatal consequences to himself. Expecting change because of his resolution to be 'good', he finds instead that there is no change in the picture except 'that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite' (261). He comes to the final devastating revelation that his attempt to reform himself was motivated only by vanity and hypocrisy. No longer able to live with his two faces, he kills the painted image, which is his real self. The split turns out to be fatal.

The same trajectory is played out in Stevenson's *Strange Case*, and Henry Jekyll speaks in much the same terms as Dorian about the nature of manhood. In his statement of his own case, Jekyll points out that he was always torn between the performance of public duty and the sense of high calling and reputation on the one hand, and the pursuit of private pleasures on the other, which meant that by the time he attained the maturity that is the marker of a real man, he was 'already committed to a profound duplicity of life' (55) though he utterly, if unconvincingly, denies the charge of hypocrisy: 'Though so profound a double-dealer, I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest' (55). His experiments lead him to the conclusion that:

man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens. (55–6)

The logic of playing multiple roles in a series of stylised performances of gender, as Judith Butler might put it, is disintegration from wholeness. (It involves performances and is also 'performative', since both Dorian and Jekyll's 'sins' are suggested mostly – short of murder of course – to be the standard forms of misbehaviour of middle-class men in their own particular social milieus. They do not show much original imagination in their sojourns to the dark side.) In a society which values integrity extremely highly, though, their inability to

manage the psychic contradictions of the roles of the gentleman is devastating. The complex, multiform, many-layered creature of Victorian manhood is sometimes fatally wounded by the split of his experiences of masculinity.

These *fin-de-siècle* split personalities may seem a very long way away from Tennyson's reimagining of the story of Odysseus in the 1840s. But there too the split was conceived of as fatal. Ulysses invites his mariners to share an adventurous death, not a glorious life. The image he weaves is of old men raging against the dying of the light:

We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are –
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate. (ll. 66–9)

He may promise the mariners that they 'will not yield' (l. 70), but there is no escaping the final reckoning. Like the boy children in the narratives of Saki and Kipling, and like the mature adult men in those by Stevenson and Wilde, there is damage which cannot be evaded in the conflicting pulls of the masculine code. In the myth of Odysseus narrated by Homer, the maker of textual material is in fact the patient wife, Penelope, who avoids the fate of remarriage by telling the rapacious suitors that she will marry one of them only when she has completed a tapestry she is weaving. She weaves all day and everyday; at night, she unpicks her stitches so that the tapestry will never be completed. The split that her husband narrates following his homecoming in Tennyson's poem is another such unravelling. The story of his dissatisfaction with the mundane world of home and his will to seek adventure beyond the horizon points out the fabrication of manliness. It is a yarn that he cuts rather than spins because the contradictions cannot be reconciled and apparently cannot be borne.

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