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J. M. Jeffers Beckett's Masculinity. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 203 pp. \$ 80.00. ISBN: 978-0-230-61528-1.

Given the fact that Samuel Beckett explicitly ruled out performances of his texts where the characters' genders are altered, it is somewhat surprising that the diverse concepts of masculinity featured in his work have been largely overlooked in most criticism. In her study of *Beckett's Masculinity*, Jennifer M. Jeffers points out that traditional scholarship preferred to view Beckett's creations as "bizarre asexual eccentrics" (p. 2) rather than gendered beings, though characters like Pozzo (in *Godot*) undeniably base their identity on prevalent types of masculinity. Jeffers' insightful takes on Beckett's canonical texts prove valuable additions to current discussions of gender discourse and nationhood, as the author deftly integrates Irish history (and its legacy of decline and displacement) and Beckett's upbringing in Dublin.

The underlying thesis that Jeffers explores throughout her book is that the partition of Ireland and the formation of the Catholic free state brought a traumatic experience upon the Anglo-Irish community which Beckett grew up in, rendering him (and his family) void of political (and, consequently, masculine) power. This trauma of displacement is reenacted time and again in Beckett's writings and often occurs in the shape of the murdered or absent father. Beckett thus "may physically leave Ireland and temporarily abandon English," yet, "he compulsively returns to Ireland and to the father his entire career" (p. 66). Jeffers applies Freudian categories and Cathy Caruth's groundbreaking studies on trauma and its symptoms: Beckett's poetical credo (I can't go on, I'll go on.) can be read as the utterance of a trauma survivor who employs compulsive repetition to master his experience in the realm of fiction, "exposing the hollowness of all culturally normative forms of Western masculinity" in the process (p. 37).

There is no denying the author's detailed knowledge of the field, as she has both written and edited a number of volumes on Beckett and Irish literature. Her mapping of the father image upon the cultural identity of the Irish is indeed a convincing vehicle to explore masculine discourse in Beckett's plays and prose. Viewed from this theoretical angle, the early novels (like *Murphy* and *Watt*) can be deciphered as failed attempts to come to terms with the symbolic death of the father, as Beckett is still playing within patriarchy's confines. It is only with *Waiting for Godot* and his turn toward what will later become known as "Theatre of the Absurd" that Beckett manages "to overturn the standards of the Western heterosexual matrix" and to "completely upend the very logic on which the system operates" (p. 79). The vagrants that populate *Godot* and *Endgame* represent countertypes to the masculine ideal who are completely lacking in virility; their vain hope for a return of the masculine (as embodied by Godot) is one never to be fulfilled.

Jeffers aptly observes that traumatic repetition is "the shape of Beckett's text life" (p. 152), yet her argument could sometimes benefit from putting less emphasis on the biographical aspect of this statement. In some chapters, Jeffers reads Beckett's texts and the historical

discourse merely in order to explore Beckett's own masculinity, using the plays and novels as vehicles to explore the author's personality, not vice versa. Her reading of *Krapp's Last Tape* is very taken with the idea of finding authorial intent, while the women-centered plays serve as an indication of how traumatised Beckett must have been during his life (cf. p. 149). Similarly, Jeffers' rather personal comment on one biographical incident (as a young student, Beckett was caught in bed with another boy, and the author informs us that "[she] believe[s] that Beckett did not have sexual intent with [the boy]," p. 28) may be of interest for biographers; in the context of an otherwise fascinating exploration of gendered identities in literary texts, however, it proves an unnecessary distraction. Jeffers deliberately stays away from Beckett's connections with the tenets of existentialism (which may have been overstated in the past), yet there is a lot more to Beckett's theater than a mere "microcosm of the Protestant community in the first decades of the twentieth century" (p. 133), as Jeffers' own detailed and thorough interpretations indicate in their complexity.

This being said, the central argument of the book remains a powerful one and convincingly links Beckett's growth as a writer to his increasingly refined representations of masculinities, ultimately culminating in gender parody (in *Happy Days*) and the mastering of traumatic experience (in his fragmented final prose texts). It is much to Jennifer Jeffers' credit that the issue of gender and the counterdiscourse to hegemonic concepts of masculine identity which can be found at the heart of Beckett's writings provide a worthy new chapter to the field of Beckett studies.