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A. Kestner *Joseph Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction, 1880-1915*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. 210 pp. £49.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6901-2.

In his oft-quoted poem, *If*, Rudyard Kipling famously laid down the Victorian code of conduct, which ends with the promise that he who follows this advice will “be a Man, my son!” Victorian adventure tales, on the other hand, suggest that the notion of restraint (as favored by Kipling) was not dominant in the popular concept of masculinity, as many of these narratives deal with brutal invasions of foreign territory. Joseph Kestner’s study explores the Victorian Masculinity script by focusing on the *rites de passage* in classic adventure tales of H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. Their writings, which widely circulated in Britain at the turn of the century, must be viewed as a countermovement to the process of urbanization, which is linked to an overall destabilization of traditional masculinity scripts. In his readings of *Treasure Island* and *King Solomon’s Mines*, Kestner stresses the underlying escapist nature of the tales, which provided both entertainment for the neglected male reader as well as gendered codes of behavior, mapping the “transport, transfer, and/or transform[ation of] masculine identities” (p. 98) unto the most elementary of all story grammars: the crossing of borders.

The four main chapters of the book group several analyses of canonical tales together under individual headings such as *Voyaging* and *Invading*. Each of these represents a different facet of the Victorian adventurer, whose manhood is tested in homosocial environments (such as ship crews in the works of Conrad). Thus, Kipling is presented as “the great chronicler of male homosocial spaces” (p. 86), whose protagonists would often rather die in the battle than go through the ordeal of “marital self-destruction” (p. 90). The individual interpretations do not offer radically new takes on major texts like *Heart of Darkness* or *The Man Who Would Be King*; indeed, many of the key themes addressed here (such as the exploration of the African continent as an act of penetration, and the encounter with an effeminate Other) have already been investigated closely in postcolonial readings. Moreover, the lack of in-depth interpretations (only few of the analyses amount to more than seven pages) means that not all the primary texts get the appropriate treatment or are examined beneath their surface level. The structure of the book seems to suggest that each tale is to be filed under one thematic angle alone, whereas, in fact, the notions of voyaging, mapping, and invading often intersect—especially in the more complex adventure novels. In addition, the chapter on Conrad’s “Youth” is the only one to focus properly on the problem of narrative transmission (which is of major importance regarding masculine identity constructions in literature), and the analysis of the underlying ideological texture could have benefitted from some reference to Yuri Lotman and his work on border dynamics in narrative texts.

Still, the author demonstrates an impressively detailed knowledge of the field and provides a fantastic general introduction to the genre. Kestner, who has already published a number of volumes on the Victorian era (including studies of detective fiction and painting), offers many absorbing examples of the various conceptualizations of male identity, ranging from *The Prisoner of Zenda* (whose impostor performance of chivalric ideals allows for “a flawless investigation of masculinity as a script, a role, a construction, a disguise”, p. 153), or the character of Harry Feversham in Mason’s *The Four Feathers*, who may represent a successful

New Man and who questions the “out-dated male paradigms” which his ancestors have lived by (p. 115). Kestner reasons that “[t]o become an English gentleman” means “to first have been an adventurer” in the Victorian era (p. 75), and his book manages to capture the ambiguous nature of these literary entertainments for the masses. He explores the ongoing fascination of these timeless tales, but there are also bleaker, more profound moments with far more serious implications: it is not without some degree of bitterness that Kestner describes how hundreds of World War I soldiers put a volume of John Buchan’s fiction in their kit (p. 176), which helps to give the contemporary reader some idea of how the masculine ideals advertised in Victorian fiction would lead a whole generation of young men astray.