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Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature.
By MATHEW RICKARD. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021. xii + 257 pp.

In this book, Mathew Rickard capably and enthusiastically studies ‘the literary representation of non-normative masculinity at a time when masculinity was perceived to be in crisis’ (p. 18). For Rickard, the *fin-de-siècle* masculinity crisis ‘ironically allowed greater representation of alternative behaviours and identities precisely due to the questioning of masculinity that was occurring’ (p. 18). Are there places and times when masculinity is *not* in crisis for someone? How are we to decide if one individual’s masculinity crisis is of wider consequence? Rickard, who situates his writers in the context of the loss of the Franco-Prussian War, concerns about depopulation, struggles for women’s emancipation, and a new sexological interest in ‘perversity’, wonders if masculinity is ‘inherently toxic’ or if ‘queerer, intersectional, even healthier forms of masculinity [can] flourish’ (p. 13). Do all non-normative forms of masculinity array themselves on the side of the queer? Is the queer always a ‘healthier’ or more progressive option? Rickard’s book joins a fascinating body of recent work addressing these difficult questions. Marlon B. Ross’s *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), for instance, is interesting to read in parallel with Rickard’s volume. At one point, Ross tellingly juxtaposes James Baldwin and Truman Capote. Baldwin is Ross’s exemplar of successful insurgency. Capote’s masculinity, for all its non-normative misfittedness, is one some might qualify as counter-insurgent. ‘Sissiness is manifested differently in different racial formations’, Ross suggests (*Sissy Insurgencies*, p. 29). Racial formations per se do not come up in Rickard’s study, but he mentions, for instance, ‘the intersection of class and masculinity’ (*Against the Grain*, p. 46). I might tend to surmise that at

least one or two of the four figures Rickard studies fall mostly on the Capote side of things (non-normative masculinity being a privilege aligned with other social entitlements) rather than the Baldwin one, but perhaps Rickard would have a different view. Clusters of interrelated social variables specific to different socio-cultural contexts are crucial to the evaluation of any instance of non-normative masculinity. Forms of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ are themselves plural in most historical contexts. When Jean Lorrain and Joris-Karl Huysmans, from their very different social locations, engage with ‘masculinity’, are they engaging with the same thing? Are all people who exhibit non-normative masculinity ‘adversely affected by the laws of the Patriarchy’ (p. 11) to the same degree and in the same way? Rickard begins his demonstration with Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), exploring how ‘non-normative men can appropriate a hegemonic identity through engaging with literature’ (p. 60). He then examines how, in Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901), ‘the representation of witchcraft [...] links to the presentation of non-normative masculinity through comparable engagement with marginal practices’ (p. 65). The third chapter studies Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La Tour d’amour* (1899), and shows how in Rachilde’s work, a reconfigured masculinity can be found in both ‘passive’ men and some women. In a final chapter, on Octave Mirbeau’s *Le Calvaire* (1886), Rickard takes up the topic of impotence (literal and figurative, real and fictional) to probe what kind of an achievement textual (as well as real life) ‘masculine author(ity)’ might be (p. 170). Sometimes Rickard writes that things are ‘*inherently queer*’ (pp. 69, 119; my emphasis): occulture in the Lorrain chapter for instance, or, in Rachilde’s crafty hands, normative masculinity itself. I wonder if the materials Rickard so richly details for his readers might rather encourage us to think relationally, and to come to understand how not all stances that fail to be normative necessarily qualify as queer or insurgent or progressive.

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