

Femininities and masculinities in British and Irish literature and culture

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With his *Advice to Young Men* (1830) William Cobbett offered a series of letters with lessons on how to be a perfect nineteenth-century middle-class gentleman. Cobbett's conduct text allows for three important observations: firstly, that one needs to learn what it means to be a man or a woman. Secondly, that the rules on the performance of one's gender differed across historical periods. And, thirdly, Cobbett's conduct manual proves one cannot talk about one gender's construction without analysing - in equally precise terms - what it means to be the other(s).

This final observation was one of the most important conclusions from the third and fourth waves of feminist movements. And so, to Simone de Beauvoir's statement "one is not born a woman, but becomes one", masculinity / men's studies replied: the same applies to being men. Just as there are many types of women, there are many kinds of men.

This BA seminar begins with this very research question: what has it meant to be a man or a woman across centuries, however, with a special attention given to the 18th and 19th centuries. We will research the notions of gender and gender performance on the example of British and Irish literature, with careful attention to cultural studies (i.e. using New Historicism, Feminist Studies, Women Studies, Men's Studies, Posthuman studies). Participants will engage in reading a variety of literary and paraliterary texts representing men/women, and the way their ideal(s) or antimodels have been imagined in British and Irish literature. As such, students will study and, eventually, write their BA theses on, for example: the notions of bad women (or monstrous women) vs their ideological ideals; patriarchal ideals of masculinity vs types of maleness that do not follow the ideological rules; normative sexualities vs cultural taboos; histories and *herstories* of family bliss and tragedy; prosaic or poetic explorations of femininity and masculinity vs dramatic renditions and performances of gender, and many more. Importantly, this seminar invites students who like to read and write about literature (without the help of ChatGPT) but also are ready to engage in in-depth literary and cultural research.

NOTE: This seminar is not for you, if you want to write about the media or film (unless it is an adaptation of a novel/drama). It is also not for you, if you wish to write about American literature, unless it pertains to important comparative aspects.

Potential topics may include (this is only a tentative proposition!):

Gothic women and their transgressive potential.

The perfect woman in selected eighteenth-century novels.

Men writing women in the Victorian period.

Monstrous men in nineteenth-century fiction.

Fatherhood in eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction.

Madness and femininity in nineteenth-century literary texts and ego-documents.

Motherhood as prerogative or ideological requirement in British fiction.

Marriage and social roles on the basis of selected eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts.

Selected critical bibliography

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Blamires, Alcuin, with Karen Pratt and C.W. Marx. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Cobbett, William. Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) to Young Women in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life. In a Series of Letters, Addressed to a Youth, a Bachelor, a Lover, a Husband, a Father, a Citizen, or a Subject. [1830] 1906.

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Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar, eds. *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.

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Tosh, John. *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Whitehead, Stephen. *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.