

Reviews

Penner, James. *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks: The Rhetoric of Masculinity in American Literary Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011. 300 pages. ISBN 978-0-253-22251-0. \$24.95. Paper.

New men's studies, or masculinities studies as it is known today, emerged in academia in the 1990s. The movement was informed by feminist theory and attempted to demolish masculinity's normative status. James Penner's *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks* is one of the latest additions to the field. It presents a cultural history of macho criticism in American literary culture from the 1930s to the 1970s. Penner's definition of "literary culture" is broad, including "novels, plays, poetry, diaries, journals, manifestos, essays, literary criticism, journalism, nonfiction, essays from psychology and sociology as well as screenplays that have been turned into Hollywood films"—such as *Rebel without a Cause* (21). The broad canvas is one of the strengths of the book. It gives depth and new insight and serves to support Penner's lucid analyses.

Beginning his study in the Depression, a decade "dominated by the masculine cult of virility," Penner traces the ways in which American literary culture has served as a rhetoric battleground between masculine hardness and effete softness. Penner starts with Michael Gold's savage attack on Thornton Wilder, in which he labels Wilder as an effete, genteel, and pious homosexual. In contrast, Gold valorized Walt Whitman who, unlike Wilder, embraced the masses and absorbed a "working-class energy ... and manliness" (28). As Penner points out, there is a blatant irony in the fact that the homophobic Gold embraces Whitman. This irony is "familiar in macho criticism," says Penner and goes on to show how "the apparently watertight gender theories that conflate class and masculine type often contain an ideological leak" (28). This becomes obvious in the following chapters: Penner describes how the psychological literature of the 1930s was concerned with curing effeminacy and homosexuality. Terman and Miles' M-F

tests suggested that “hypermasculinity was viewed as a cultural advantage and a social virtue” (44).

This presumption is, to some extent, carried into the 1940s and 50s, where “the cult of hardness” becomes “a recurring metaphor in American cultural life” (67). But there is a crucial difference: the left-wing now becomes synonymous with softness and effiteness. The 1940s is also a decade of “stark contrasts,” a period Penner calls a “watershed in gay and lesbian history” (80). 1948 is the year of the Kinsey Report and of the publication of “two classics of gay fiction”: Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (81), and this sparks an anti-homosexual backlash that also ties into a critique of emasculating American mothers. At the frontline of the backlash Penner shows us of people like Arthur Schlesinger (attacking “doughface progressive[s]” (68)) and Joe McCarthy (attacking “pinks, pansies, and punks” (71)). Penner gives an insightful queer reading of the 1949 trial against Alger Hiss, “the biggest doughface of them all” (91). According to Penner, the trial was “an ideological battle that was constructed through conflicting narratives of soft masculinity that ultimately implied that certain soft individuals could not be trusted with government secrets” (91). The Hiss-Chambers trial was seen as a rhetorical victory” for anti-communists, and according to Penner, it “signifies the historical moment when the stereotype of softness becomes manifest and culturally embedded” (95).

However, in his outstanding chapter on the 1950s, Penner shows how the Beats and other youth cultures “dramatically reclaimed and reinvented” soft masculinity” (97). Through analyses of texts—Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*—Penner outlines the rise of the square and the problem of social conformity. The antithesis to the square was the “low culture and adolescent” hipster, “a divisive figure for high-brow intellectuals and critics in the 1950s” (117).

Penner uses Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” and Kerouac’s *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans* to show how the Beats “simultaneously occupy both gender positions in an ambivalent and contradictory fashion” (123). He then shows how Ginsberg’s confessional poetry rejected the strict gender essentialism of the New Critics, whose ideal of the autotelic poem conveys, Penner asserts provocatively, “the male fantasy of literature as a hermetic space that is impervious to feminine contamination” (134).

The 1960s saw a conflict between the Old Left (Leslie Fiedler et al) and the New Left (Susan Sontag), something Penner roots in differences of gen-

der sensibility and masculine identity. He argues that the “affective soft-bodied masculinity of Ginsberg and the Beats morphs into a Dionysian sensibility ... a mode of behavior where the male figure can ... occupy opposing subject positions at the same time” (165). Other exponents of transformative masculinity that Penner discusses are William S. Burroughs, Timothy Leary, and The Living Theater’s 1968 production of *Paradise Now*. In his perceptive analysis of *Paradise Now*, Penner shows how the new soft male and the sexual politics of the counterculture “did not necessarily produce a more enlightened or progressive view of women and their bodies” and “often resembled the chauvinism of the previous generation” (211).

It hardly comes as a surprise that as the alternative masculinities became more mainstream, they were met by a homophobic and hypermasculine backlash. Penner uses the Black Panther movement and Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* in particular as examples of “the mythic fascination with hypermasculinity” in the late 1960s and early 1970s (213). And to make the picture even more complex, Penner outlines the deeply contested nature of the feminist struggle and shows how the radical feminist Kate Millett both deplored masculine hardness and remained suspicious of effeminate and passive males.

Some of Penner’s examples and points have already been made in Peter Schwenger’s *Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and Twentieth Century Literature* (1984) and Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996), books that for some reason are not found in Penner’s bibliography. That said, Penner has written a fascinating, well-researched, and perceptive survey of a complex and still relevant issue. Nuanced and written in clear, lucid prose, *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks* is a welcome contribution to gender studies and a fresh angle on American literary studies.

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Mark Twain’s World Readership

Demarcsek, Ramona, Minodora Barbul, and Ligia Tomoiga, eds. *A Century under the Spirit of Mark Twain: 1910-2010*, Anniversary Series. Baia Mare: Editura Universitatii de Nord, 2011. 208 pages. ISBN 978-606-536-161-4. Paperback.

The collection is international in that two essays are by American scholars, three are by Iranian Twain scholars, and six are by Romanian schol-