

# Fragile Masculinity: an exploration into the construction of bourgeois male identity in 1850s London

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*This article considers the first scene of the painting Past and Present (Augustus Egg, 1858) alongside a contemporary advertisement for Walter Berdoe: Tailor and Overcoat Maker (1854). Through these sources, the construction of masculinity in Victorian bourgeois society is explored. Masculinity studies is a burgeoning area of research, as traditionally focus has concerned the position of women and the imbalance of power between the genders. These artefacts are used as a lens to examine the changing status of male identity in 1850s London, and the complex balance between outward authority and internal instability.*

The field of masculinity studies is indebted to 1970s second-wave feminist scholarship which introduced academic analysis on the basis of gender.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, the study of masculine history and identity has been considered a contentious subject; gender scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick denigrated the discipline as the ‘vast national wash of masculine self-pity’.<sup>2</sup> However, masculine scholarship is not intended to vindicate privileged patriarchal systems. Instead, interrogation of the cause and mentality responsible provides insight into power imbalance. As feminist studies have highlighted, the oppression of women was acute in Victorian Britain, making the examination of masculine authority all the more necessary. Although, as Herbert Sussman acknowledges, exploration of the patriarchal role demands sensitivity:

for the writer on Victorian masculinities the problem of power and patriarchy calls for a double awareness, a sensitivity both to the ways in which these social formations of the masculine created conflict, anxiety, tension in men, while acknowledging that, in spite of the stress, men accepted these formations as a form of self-policing crucial to patriarchal domination.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, here Sussman introduces the crux of the subject; that, despite appearances, Victorian masculinity was a fragile combination of outward authority, and internal anxiety. This complex balance – termed by Michael Roper and John Tosh as the dichotomy between ‘psychic fragility and social power’<sup>4</sup> – is demonstrated in these artefacts.

Although both are visual sources, these two differ in style and purpose. The advertisement for *Walter Berdoe* (Fig. 1) is a commercial artefact from 1854. This engraving advertises two London premises for a tailor and overcoat maker; its purpose is to publicise the businesses in order to attract male clientele.

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<sup>1</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, p. 3.



Figure 1: H. Stanton, *Walter Berdoe, Tailor and Over Coat Maker* (1854), engraved advertisement, 21.9 × 28.0 cm (The John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Shelfmark: Men's Clothes 1 (12); Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, CC BY NC)

By contrast, *Past and Present, No. 1* (Fig.2) is an oil painting forming one part of a triptych by Augustus Egg. It is important to note that this title has been adopted – it was initially exhibited at the Royal Academy, London in 1858 with the subtitle:

August the 4th - Have just heard that B - has been dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!<sup>5</sup>

Egg's painting is concerned with a bourgeois household and shows a scene of husband discovering his wife's infidelity. There is a strong narrative and, unlike the *Walter Berdoe* advertisement, the painting is categorised as 'high art'.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as the two sources relate to the bourgeois male of 1850s London, careful analysis provides insight into the status and construction of Victorian masculine identity, particularly with reference to the role of the public and private spheres.

<sup>5</sup> Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 71 - 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.



Figure 2: Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present, No. 1* (1858), oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm  
(Photograph © Tate Gallery, London, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0, (Unported)  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/egg-past-and-present-no-1-n03278>)

The Victorian era marks a new chapter in the history of masculinity. The shifts in economic hierarchy introduced in the eighteenth century were expounded through the Industrial Revolution, meaning wealth was no longer the exclusive domain of the landed gentry. Such changes to industry also established the crucial separation between work and home, public and private life. Men of the flourishing middle-class found status defined in terms of economic success. This brought about a changed definition of masculine behaviour, with hard work and self-control considered manly attributes. This was further supported by the prevailing Protestant theology, demonstrated by Thomas Carlyle's 1843 advocacy of 'The Gospel of Work', decreeing labour a God-given imperative.<sup>7</sup> The view that disciplined work was manly and should be celebrated was also reflected in the fashion of the economic middle-class, through 'The Great Masculine

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert Sussman, *Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2012), p. 86.

Renunciation'.<sup>8</sup> As the behaviour and dress of the aristocracy was seen in terms of idleness and luxury it was deemed effeminate, and so by contrast, this new class conscientiously adopted sombre, practical and frugal clothing as a statement of integrity and masculinity.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the dress of Victorian male society served as an indicator of status, and masculine identity was constructed based on self-discipline and performance. Having recognised this, the significance of the male outfitters can be appreciated.

When considering the *Walter Berdoe* advertisement, it must be noted that as these are engravings and not photographs, they cannot be read as exact replicas of the original shops. Instead, the significance of the advertisement lies in understanding the message *Walter Berdoe* is trying to convey, and thus the customers they are hoping to attract through these means. Examination quickly reveals that the two shops represent, and therefore are targeted at, different clientele. This is readily identifiable by the dress of the customers depicted, the different shop frontages, and the locations listed. The New Bond Street shop is evidently intended for a higher class of customer – this is a Mayfair tailor, there are customers shown in top hats and breeches, and women are also included in the scene. The shop façade is highly ornate, comprising fretwork, stone carvings and arches, whilst the building and the shop window both display an elaborate crest featuring a lion and unicorn.

By contrast, the Corn Hill shop is located in the mercantile district of the city. The façade portrayed is much simpler; using straight lines and geometric shapes, basic light fittings, and the goods for sale are advertised in signs on the windows and stone façade. Whereas the New Bond Street shop was primarily a tailor, this store prominently advertises waterproof overcoats. Significantly, the clientele depicted is exclusively male, and all wear long trousers. The man entering the shop is wearing a bowler hat – a recent invention from 1850, largely considered working-class fashion.<sup>10</sup> The group depicted, and therefore the target audience, is the industrial masculine bourgeoisie. The contemporary celebration of rigour and work is encapsulated by Henry Dunckley's declaration; 'Trade has now a chivalry of its own [...] the nobility and dignity of industry and commerce.'<sup>11</sup> In adopting this uniform of modest, pragmatic clothing, the middle-class working man consciously made a statement about his economic and masculine status; publicly identifying himself as a member of this group.

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<sup>8</sup> David Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550 – 1850* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> V&A History of Fashion 1840-1900 <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/history-of-fashion-1840-1900/>> [Accessed January 8 2020].

<sup>11</sup> Kuchta, p. 150.

It is interesting that the two separate premises and their different demographics are advertised on the one item. This may simply be a cost-effective measure, but it also may reflect another aspect of the changing Victorian society. At this time social groups and classes were shifting; the accumulation of wealth by the middle-class demonstrated that it was possible to change position within society, and so introduced the concept of the 'self-made man'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, as disciplined work continued to be extolled, the word 'gentleman' was redefined, 'no longer referring to a man of gentle birth, a man of the gentry, but to purely characterological traits.'<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the simultaneous appeal to both classes in this advertisement reflects the possibility of movement between social groups. Arguably, the New Bond Street tailor is not intended for an upper-class market, but rather functions as an aspirational token for the bourgeois clientele. This would explain the overt declaration of the low prices, as the economic middle-class male took pride in frugality.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as Sussman highlights, despite the middle-class denigration of the aristocracy, there remained a contradictory desire to emulate their actions: 'a desire to employ monetary success to inhabit a preindustrial style'.<sup>15</sup> If a man was born into wealth he was considered effeminate, whereas a man's ability to reach the same position through hard work and ambition was deemed 'the epitome of manliness'.<sup>16</sup> As such, it is possible that despite appearances, the advertisement for *Walter Berdoe* has been designed solely to attract the custom of the male economic, middle-class market.

A defining feature for the Victorian bourgeoisie was the separation between home and workplace.<sup>17</sup> This division created a basic gendering: women were defined by their domestic role, while men were characterised by their employment in a public setting. As a result, the public arena came to be viewed as masculine, and the domestic became the feminine domain. Women's restricted access to the public sphere demonstrates the imbalance of power between the sexes: 'much of men's power has resided in their privileged freedom to pass at will between the public and the private.'<sup>18</sup> Thus, the construction of bourgeois masculine identity is largely defined by their place within the public sphere. The importance of men's public persona is clearly reflected in the *Walter Berdoe* advertisement, in particular the Corn Hill premises. Here, it is an exclusively masculine clientele that is represented in the public forum of the shop. Furthermore, the clothes for sale are overcoats and riding capes: evidently designed for wearing outside. This is further emphasised by the overt advertising of the waterproof nature of the items sold. The demand for clothing able to withstand the elements truly encapsulates the public nature of masculine identity. Meanwhile, the functional fabric reflects the middle-class championship of practicality and restraint – these

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<sup>12</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Kuchta, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> Nead, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Tosh, p. 5.

are not luxury items; they are designed to serve a purpose. In addition, the listing for *Walter Berdoe* in the advertising sheet (Fig.3) reveals the improvements that the company had made to the waterproofing technique: typifying the Victorian interest in progress and development.

**WALTER BERDOE'S**  
ORIGINAL IMPROVED  
**WATERPROOF CLOTHING.**

**A**N IMPORTANT DISCOVERY has been made in WATERPROOFING GENTLEMEN'S CLOTHING, which renders it completely impervious to rain or damp, WITHOUT IMPEDING THE FREE ESCAPE OF PERSPIRATION, altering its appearance, or imparting to it any objectionable property whatever. This invaluable process is applicable to every description of material or garment, and when generally known, will, doubtless, entirely supersede the unsightly and unhealthy articles hitherto in use. Waterproof cloaks, capes, frock and great coats, trousers, &c., which is greatly improved by the process (of an improved make), furnished at a small extra charge, or the material sold or rendered waterproof by WALTER BERDOE, Tailor and Draper, 69, Cornhill (only). Beware of substitutes.

Figure 3: Richards, Woods, and Co., *Land of Promise Advertising Sheet* (1839) (digitised by Google)

This successful industrial development reflects the newly defined masculine trait of productivity. Furthermore, this listing is part of an advertising sheet for ‘persons proceeding to South Australia’ – the waterproof items intended for those venturing to unknown terrain on the other side of the world. Here, the need to withstand all weather conditions is linked to the traditional masculine characteristics of heroism and adventure.<sup>19</sup> But indeed, the masculine domain of the working world was itself presented in such terms. This is clearly demonstrated in John Ruskin’s *Of Queen’s Gardens* lecture a decade later. Here, in advocating separate spheres for men and women, Ruskin presents masculinity as pre-determined and universal, describing male character thus:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer and defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention, his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest.<sup>20</sup>

Again, the conventional masculine attributes of strength and courage are used to justify the exclusively male domain of employment. Such presentation of masculinity is also reflected in the simple act of wearing a waterproof coat. This makes an active statement of male character, symbolising the belief that the public realm of employment is innately masculine – a place of exploration and risk, from which women must be shielded.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* ed. by Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 77.

The gendering of public and private spheres is readily interpreted as the opposition of male emancipation and female oppression – a view initially expressed through feminist academics.<sup>21</sup> However, in order to appreciate the complexity of Victorian masculine identity, it is necessary to address the male experience of employment at this time. While an occupation granted greater freedom and status, recent masculinity studies have addressed the challenging working conditions that men faced. As Sussman has identified, the rigorous advocacy of discipline and self-reliance encouraged individualism, rather than community:

This redefinition of masculine identity sees the ideal man within a capitalist society as an essentially self-regarding individual looking only to his own personal well-being: a well-being defined solely in monetary terms.<sup>22</sup>

John Tosh also notes the alienation faced due to the ‘dehumanized personal relations’<sup>23</sup> of modernised industry, whilst also addressing the significant social costs of these technological advancements.<sup>24</sup> As a result, he posits that the workplace was a harsh, unyielding environment from which the working man craved the refuge offered to them by the home:

Home was felt to be the only place where the vulnerability that lay behind the public mask of strength and imperturbability could be shared with someone else.<sup>25</sup>

Although arguably this declaration is somewhat hyperbolic, it does raise the issue of the public and private personas of the Victorian male, challenging the accepted view that their ready access to the world of work was a symbol of freedom. Instead, the expectation to fulfil this role is presented as a burden, against which men craved domestic sanctuary. Following this interpretation, the working man was actively defined by the very attributes that destabilised him. Yet, despite underlying anxieties, the advertisement celebrates the dress and status of the economic male, and thus reflects the masculine adoption of a public image to disguise internal unease.

Having acknowledged the dynamic of public and private spheres, the role of masculinity and domesticity in *Past and Present* can now be considered. At the time of exhibition, John Ruskin identified the couple as bourgeois, declaring the man ‘an ordinary husband – employed at some house in the city.’<sup>26</sup> As such, Egg has depicted the same demographic represented in, and targeted by, the *Walter Berdoe* advertisement. It is therefore reasonable to posit that the figure in the narrative embodies the same attributes and anxieties of masculinity now identified in the economic middle-class male. Significantly, the scene depicted concerns a domestic setting: ‘the fall is literally enacted in a middle-class interior.’<sup>27</sup> This aspect has predominantly

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<sup>21</sup> Tosh, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, p. 88.

<sup>23</sup> Tosh, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Tosh, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Nead, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

been viewed in relation to the woman's fate. As a wife's purity was expected to safeguard the home, the adulteress was viewed as a particularly dangerous and abhorrent figure: her transgression having 'infiltrated the very stronghold of respectability'.<sup>28</sup> In addressing the triptych, Nead identifies the opposition that Egg sets up between internal and external spaces: the woman's fall sees her cast from the safety of the home to the dangers of the city; ultimately resulting in absolute exposure through homelessness.<sup>29</sup> Although the wife's fate is extreme, the narrative does corroborate that exposure to the city and public life was a challenge, against which the home provided a sanctuary. Tosh specifies that 'the heyday of masculine domesticity [was] from the 1830s to the 1860s',<sup>30</sup> and quite clearly the production of the painting falls within this period. Once the contemporary masculine desire for domesticity has been recognised, the wife's betrayal is then understood as the destruction of his safe haven. Analysis tends to address the role of the fallen woman, rather than the shame experienced by the cuckolded husband. Employing Tosh's pronouncement that 'the home was central to Masculinity',<sup>31</sup> the wife's unwomanly behaviour has served to emasculate her husband. In 1828, the Reverend H.C. O' Donoghue declared:

The married man's self-respect is kept alive by finding that though all around is darkness and humiliation, yet there is still a little world of love at home, of which he is the monarch.<sup>32</sup>

Following this, *Past and Present* depicts a very threatening scene of treason. In order to fully appreciate the painting and the cuckoldry portrayed, it is crucial to understand the masculine attitude towards the home. The fact that the male desire for domesticity was borne out of anxiety further confirms the unstable foundations upon which Victorian masculinity was constructed.

A fundamental fear of cuckoldry was the risk of raising children of uncertain paternity, as the concept of lineage was crucial to masculine identity.<sup>33</sup> Returning to *Walter Berdoe*, the inclusion of children with parents outside the Mayfair premises reveals the importance of this subject. The fact that men are shown at a clothing shop with their sons references 'breeching': the stage where boys transitioned from wearing petticoats to trousers, and the father was expected to adopt a more active role.<sup>34</sup> Breeching served as a rite-of-passage: the visual indicator of masculinity. This small detail in the advertisement clearly demonstrates the significance of dynasty to the male identity. Following this, it is interesting to note that *Past and Present* – which alludes to the question of paternity – does not include sons. Inevitably, interpretations have focused on the relationship between the mother and her daughters. Nead readily interprets this as symptomatic of female oppression, highlighting that contemporary medical discourse thought infidelity

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<sup>28</sup> J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Nead, p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> Tosh, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

was a congenital disease the female offspring could inherit.<sup>35</sup> The stigmatisation faced is reinforced by Holman Hunt's declaration in *The Reader* of January 1864: 'Upon them too, the sin shall be visited, in whispers of pity at the last, for all their years to come.'<sup>36</sup> Clearly this speaks of the inequality and subjugation of female sexuality as it is only female descendants shown to suffer from this fall. However, Egg's active decision not to include male heirs in the narrative must also be interrogated. Through their exclusion, Egg simultaneously avoids having to address how adultery would impact on a male child, and also how the father would handle concerns over the parentage of his masculine heir. The very absence of this subject exposes the fundamental anxiety over the matter.

The exclusion of the male narrative is true of the triptych itself, as Egg does not show the husband's fate following the first scene. The only reference to him lies in the paintings' subtitle, stating that he has died. Again, this is easily interpreted in terms of the double standard and inequality that women faced, as both mother and daughters are readily presented in full suffering. However, this absence can also be understood in terms of masculine shame. Egg is not prepared to visualise adversity faced by the husband, just as he chose not to include sons in the narrative. As a result, this demonstrates how fears of female sexuality and autonomy were manipulated through oppression of women. Thus, *Past and Present* embodies the dichotomy between 'psychic fragility and social power'<sup>37</sup> that constitutes the Victorian construction of masculinity.

The masculine fear – and subsequent subjugation of – female sexuality is well established. Indeed, this is a defining feature of Victorian masculine identity. However, perhaps less commonly acknowledged were the masculine anxieties over the male body and sexual desire. As Sussman has identified, the Victorians understood the male body as unstable and hydraulic; they considered masculinity to be powered by a fluid energy that was ultimately dangerous, unclean and diseased.<sup>38</sup> And so, as with the treatment of women, this insecurity was also repressed. As women were forced into the mould of feminine respectability, masculine self-regulation took place through disciplined work:

The definition of manhood as self-discipline, as the ability to control male energy and to deploy this power not for sexual but for productive purposes was clearly specific to the bourgeois man.<sup>39</sup>

This presents a new dynamic to the economic bourgeois man identified through the *Walter Berdoe* advertisement. Not only did the workplace cause unease for men through the challenging environment; Sussman's interpretation posits that the very foundation of their occupation was a desperate attempt at

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<sup>35</sup> Nead, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> Adams, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

bodily regulation. Thus, the outward celebration of the disciplined men of industry was underpinned by profound internal anxiety.

Although these sources differ in style and purpose, together they function as a window into bourgeois masculinity in 1850s London. This analysis demonstrates the significant role that both 'high art' and material culture play in understanding social history: viewed together, the artefacts provide insight and provoke questions about dress and status; role of the workplace and the home; and fears over sexuality. Whilst masculinity studies may appear to refute feminist scholarship, this is not the intention. The two methodologies should be employed in parallel, enabling fuller appreciation of a subject. Through this examination, the patriarchal figure of the Victorian man presented in feminist discourse, is variously challenged and confirmed through the revelation of significant underlying anxieties. Ultimately, it is this complex dynamic of outward authority underpinned by fundamental instability that defines Victorian masculinity.

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