(De)Constructing Daddy: The Absent Father, Revisionist Masculinity and/in Queer Cultural Representations

Andrew Schopp
University of Tennessee Martin
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.03

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.03
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol9/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
(De)Constructing Daddy: The Absent Father, Revisionist Masculinity and/in Queer Cultural Representations

Contemporary culture is almost obsessed with an Absent Father mythology. Whether literal or metaphorical, the Absent Father figures in numerous cultural representations and has been posited as the source of everything from problematic male behavior to male anxieties about what it means to be masculine. However, the Absent Father is an especially troubling figure for gay men. Heteronormative approaches to sexuality and psychological development, from Freud¹ to Jung² to contemporary religious right ministries that would “cure” queers,³ have constructed and maintained a cultural paradigm in which the homosexual male (most often seen as a male who fails at masculinity) is seen to seek in other men the male identification that his father failed to provide and/or that his domineering mother impeded.¹ Although this ideology is hardly novel, it constitutes the basis of a disturbingly common stereotype.

Given the oppressive effects of a cultural history and a psychological tradition that have so often posited the Absent Father as a cause of homosexuality, it might seem inherently problematic to include the Absent Father in a study of gay male subjectivity. Nonetheless, Judith Butler has suggested:

If it is already true that “lesbians” and
"gay men" have been traditionally designated as impossible identities, errors of classification, unnatural disasters within juridico-medical discourses ... then perhaps these sites of disruption, error, confusion and trouble can be the very rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such (16).

Butler advocates “displacing hegemonic heterosexual norms” by re-examining and re-theorizing the discourses that have empowered heterosexual hegemony. The Absent Father paradigm might constitute one such discourse. Deconstructing this paradigm can reveal potentials to resist its classifying power and foreground our culture’s dependence upon both this paradigm and a fixed method of understanding it. Richard Mohr has argued that “the social treatment of gay men and lesbians, in particular the social concepts under which society tries to classify lesbians and gay men, affects the way many dimensions of society are socially understood and normatively configured” (258). Thus, despite the problematic history of the Absent Father for gay men, this figure provides a crucial “social concept” to be interrogated, especially for those who are interested in how masculinity is understood and normatively configured.

In attempting to explore the Absent Father and its impact, there are a number of areas scholars need to investigate. For example, it would be useful to interrogate those juridico-medical discourses that have served to foster and perpetuate the Absent Father paradigm, including sexual and psychological discourses, and the discursive children they have sired, such as the “curative” theories espoused by the religious right. At the same time, we need historicized investigations that examine whether an increased cultural insistence on adhering to the masculine ideal (most often characterized by dominance, aggression, strength, success in the workplace, competition, emotional stoicism and distance) has any connection to an increasingly visible gay identity that often defies this ideal. For the purposes of this essay, however, I am examining the gay male subject’s relation to the Absent Father and this relationship’s potential as both a site of resistance to the masculine ideal, and a primary site in the struggle to redefine the parameters that configure intimacy between men.

Without question, the stereotype of the Absent Father foregrounds issues of male intimacy: in the primary father/son relationship, intimacy is barred both by the father’s need to demonstrate success in the workplace (he is physically not present) and by a culture that prohibits displays of affection and emotion between men (the father is emotionally absent, even if physically present). These barriers are then reinscribed in secondary relationships in which intimacy is sanctioned only in socially acceptable arenas (sports, workplace, bars) and modes (slap on the back, violence, competition). However, within queer representations, the Absent Father invites us to explore gay male efforts to revise both the parameters available for intimacy between men and the normative definitions of masculinity all men struggle to negotiate. Because the Absent Father remains so problematic for gay men, he can provide a rich figure for an examination that can enable a greater understanding of gay identity, of the gay community, and of masculinity, gay, straight or bi. By examining queer cultural representations in which the Absent Father figures significantly, including the fiction of David Leavitt and the recent plethora of “erotic” materials exploring Daddy/Son roleplaying fantasy, I demonstrate that the Absent Father exists as a fraught and schizophrenic figure. On the one hand, he serves as a site for the critique and revision of traditional masculinity; on the other hand, he almost always reaforms hegemonic norms of masculinity despite valiant efforts to revise such norms. This quintessentially postmodern figure reflects the incredible difficulty of challenging or revising cultural gender scripts, especially when such revision is implemented by, or associated with, those whose sexuality is in itself perceived as a challenge/threat to power, ideology and longevity of the dominant script.

During the past twenty-five years, the Absent Father has been a significant presence in a range of popular and literary works. He has factored in films such as the Star Wars films (1977, 1980, 1983), Field of Dreams (1989), Batman (1989), the Terminator films (1984, 1991), A Perfect World (1993), the mythopoetic manifesto Legends of the Fall (1994), and the most recent filmic treatise on masculinity, Fight Club (1999). In these films, the Absent Father both informs the literal or figurative son’s life and actions and elicits an interrogation of masculinity. During this same period, queer literature and erotica have offered varied representations of the Absent Father. Leavitt’s Family Dancing (1983) and Dale Peck’s Martin and John (1993) have explored the impact of missing fathers on gay sons, and the proliferation of fantasy depictions of Daddy/Son roleplays in gay erotica indicates an increased fascination with the Daddy figure. While the explosion of Daddy erotica parallels the explosion of all erotica into our culture, thanks largely to technology, the Daddy’s increasing presence in the past ten years is telling. As I argue below, the Daddy figure is a curious and problematic response to the Absent Father and all he signifies. Still, we should not be surprised to see the increase of either Absent Father or Daddy representations given the increase in discourses about masculinity and the Absent Father that have entered mainstream culture, including aca-
“gay men” have been traditionally designated as impossible identities, errors of classification, unnatural disasters within juridico-medical discourses ... then perhaps these sites of disruption, error, confusion and trouble can be the very rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such (16).

Butler advocates “displacing hegemonic heterosexual norms” by reexamining and re-theorizing the discourses that have empowered heterosexual hegemony. The Absent Father paradigm might constitute one such discourse. Deconstructing this paradigm can reveal potentials to resist its classifying power and foreground our culture’s dependence upon both this paradigm and a fixed method of understanding it. Richard Mohr has argued that “the social treatment of gay men and lesbians, in particular the social concepts under which society tries to classify lesbians and gay men, affects the way many dimensions of society are socially understood and normatively configured” (258). Thus, despite the problematic history of the Absent Father for gay men, this figure provides a crucial “social concept” to be interrogated, especially for those who are interested in how masculinity is understood and normatively configured.

In attempting to explore the Absent Father and its impact, there are a number of areas scholars need to investigate. For example, it would be useful to interrogate those juridico-medical discourses that have served to foster and perpetuate the Absent Father paradigm, including sexological and psychological discourses, and the discursive children they have sired, such as the “curative” theories espoused by the religious right. At the same time, we need historicized investigations that examine whether an increased cultural insistence on adhering to the masculine ideal (most often characterized by dominance, aggression, strength, success in the workplace, competition, emotional stoicism and distance) has any connection to an increasingly visible gay identity that often defies this ideal.3 For the purposes of this essay, however, I am examining the gay male subject’s relation to the Absent Father and this relationship’s potential as both a site of resistance to the masculine ideal, and a primary site in the struggle to redefine the parameters that configure intimacy between men.

Without question, the stereotype of the Absent Father foregrounds issues of male intimacy: in the primary father/son relationship, intimacy is barred both by the father’s need to demonstrate success in the workplace (he is physically not present) and by a culture that prohibits displays of affection and emotion between men (the father is emotionally absent, even if physically present). These barriers are then reinscribed in secondary relationships in which intimacy is sanctioned only in socially acceptable arenas (sports, workplace, bars) and modes (slap on the back, violence, competition). However, within queer representations, the Absent Father invites us to explore gay male efforts to revise both the parameters available for intimacy between men and the normative definitions of masculinity all men struggle to negotiate. Because the Absent Father remains so problematic for gay men, he can provide a rich figure for an examination that can enable a greater understanding of gay identity, of the gay community, and of masculinity, gay, straight or bi. By examining queer cultural representations in which the Absent Father figures significantly, including the fiction of David Leavitt and the recent plethora of “erotic” materials exploring Daddy/Son roleplaying fantasy, I demonstrate that the Absent Father exists as a fraught and schizophrenic figure. On the one hand, he serves as a site for the critique and revision of traditional masculinity; on the other hand, he almost always reaffirms hegemonic norms of masculinity despite valiant efforts to revise such norms. This quintessentially postmodern figure reflects the incredible difficulty of challenging or revising cultural gender scripts, especially when such revision is implemented by, or associated with, those whose sexuality is in itself perceived as a challenge/threat to power, ideology and longevity of the dominant script.

During the past twenty-five years, the Absent Father has been a significant presence in a range of popular and literary works. He has factored in films such as the Star Wars films (1977, 1980, 1983), Field of Dreams (1989), Batman (1989), the Terminator films (1984, 1991), A Perfect World (1993), the mythopoetic manifesto Legends of the Fall (1994), and the most recent filmic treatise on masculinity, Fight Club (1999). In these films, the Absent Father both informs the literal or figurative son’s life and actions and elicits an interrogation of masculinity. During this same period, queer literature and erotica have offered varied representations of the Absent Father. Leavitt’s Family Dancing (1983) and Dale Peck’s Martin and John (1993) have explored the impact of missing fathers on gay sons, and the proliferation of fantasy depictions of Daddy/Son roleplays in gay erotica indicates an increased fascination with the Daddy figure. While the explosion of Daddy erotica parallels the explosion of all erotica into our culture, thanks largely to technology, the Daddy’s increasing presence in the past ten years is telling. As I argue below, the Daddy figure is a curious and problematic response to the Absent Father and all he signifies. Still, we should not be surprised to see the increase of either Absent Father or Daddy representations given the increase in discourses about masculinity and the Absent Father that have entered mainstream culture, including aca-
demic studies of masculinity, religious treatises, and a range of self-help explorations of masculinity and male wounds.

Arguably, the most prominent of these discourses are studies by "profeminist" scholars and "mythopoetic men's movement" writers. These two "camps" offer differing responses to the challenge posed by feminist scholars, like Alice Jardine, who have asked men to speak "as body-coded male[s]" about their relationships, after feminism, to a wide variety of issues, including death, fetishism, the phallus, homosexuality and desire (61-62). While profeminist studies implement feminist theories in their exploration of male subjectivity, the most visible and most publicized works, like Robert Bly's *Iron John*, are mythopoetic studies that do not offer what many feminist writers would want since the authors of these studies are often resistant, if not outright hostile, to feminist theory and approaches. Nonetheless, while I have significant political problems with many of the mythopoetic writings, there is much to be gained by listening to and interrogating all of the voices that have begun to speak in the contemporary discourses about masculinity.

Within these discourses, the Absent Father exists as a contradictory cultural entity. Generally, he represents all that traditional masculinity has done to "harm" males, and signifies the barriers to intimacy that result from successful performances of culturally mandated masculinity. Across the board, scholars discussing the effects of the Absent Father on the contemporary male agree that men feel a great deal of loss and anxiety about fathers who were emotionally and/or physically absent, and agree that this anxiety often factors into the individual conceptions and enacting of masculinity and male subjectivity. However, there is little agreement in the ways theorists respond to this sense of loss, or in what they offer as a practical and/or theoretical remedy for the "wounds" inflicted by the Absent Father. Their differing responses reflect a crucial tension in masculinity studies that is exhibited time and again in the debates between the profeminist and mythopoetic camps, and that manifests itself in numerous cultural representations of the Absent Father.

As the introduction to *The Politics of Manhood* explains, the profeminist response to the mythopoetic men's movement centers on several themes, including:

political distress at the antifeminist rumblings that occasionally broke the surface at the mythopoetic men's gatherings; theoretical, academic criticisms of various anthropological, philosophical, and psychological assumptions; literary discomfort at the use of myths and archetypes (Kimmel, *Politics 8*)

Profeminists critique the assumptions underlying the mythopoet's major arguments, including their discussions of the Absent Father. While profeminists acknowledge the potential emotional effects of the Absent Father, they question both the emphasis mythopoets place on this wound and their curative approaches. Clatterbaugh explains that "whereas it is standard fare in pro-feminist perspectives to explore the injuries to men from having to be the best, to take control, to be the powerful dominant member in the relationship, to have institutionalized social and political power, these get no mention [in the men's movement texts] as likely or even possible causes of the costs of masculinity" ("Mythopoetic Foundations" 57). Most profeminist studies maintain that the Absent Father and its associated effects are the logical and disturbing result of an oppressive male gender norm. Thus, if mythopoetic men refuse to examine this norm and its ties to patriarchy, if they solely emphasize the wounds themselves, "mythopoetic men are not looking in even approximately the right direction for the cause of their wounds. Certainly some injuries come from personal relationships and from parents. But even these injuries are often embedded in a social and institutional context" (Clatterbaugh 59).

However, mythopoetic scholars can't seem to get beyond these wounds. Instead, they construct a paradigm that seeks to repair the wound of the Absent Father by recapturing a masculinity that supposedly no longer exists, that reinscribes traditional hegemonic masculinity as defined by patriarchal culture, and that is sufficiently associated with the phallus to indicate castration anxiety. These critics search further and further back in history for the authentic father, the authentic phal- lus, that should be miraculously unique and different, but that never is. While the Absent Father may invite a reconceptualization of masculinity, mythopoetic studies suggest that, given the Absent Father's inherent connection to the phallus, he always risks reinscribing a traditional masculinity that will perpetuate a cycle of wound and repair.

Despite the proliferating studies of masculinity that discuss the Absent Father, few address gay men or, for that matter, men of color, this is especially true within the mythopoetic camp. While some texts make marginal references to gay men, and many argue that they are discussing a "male" experience that defies sexual categorization, the tendency to rely upon heteronormative models effectively silences a discussion of gay male subjectivity. This silence is especially ironic because the Absent Father seems to have special import for the gay community which has historically struggled to develop new modes of intimacy between men. Critics such as Steven Seidman and Michael Warner have commented on gay culture's lack of an inherited and/or reproduced
As a community, we developed within a society that failed to provide models of male intimacy other than the dominant models of male bonding that tend to prohibit emotional intimacy. Thus we need to examine the extent to which the Absent Father constitutes part of the gay male's inheritance from our dominant culture, the effects of such inheritance, and efforts at resisting such inheritance. Although queer studies as a whole has tended to shy away from overt discussions of the Absent Father, contemporary gay literature and queer erotica frequently explore the effects this figure has on gay male subjectivity (and on masculinity in general), and within these representations the Absent Father manifests the same cycle of wound and repair evident in the mainstream theoretical discussions.

In what follows, I examine David Leavitt's fiction and contemporary Daddy erotica to demonstrate how the Absent Father comments upon male subjectivity and heteronormative assumptions about sexuality, and reflects the struggle to overcome barriers to intimacy. However, I also examine the way these texts reflect the queer subject's (or for that matter, the queer community's) complicity with such dominant definitions. While we might see in these representations of identity-in-flux a resistance to "reproduced" and "inherited" culture, and while this resistance might serve as a site for reconceptualizing male subjectivity (gay or straight) ris-à-ris the question of intimacy, texts such as Leavitt's also detail the limits of such resistance in the face of culturally inherited masculinity. Similarly, while the erotic depictions of "Daddy/Son" roleplays promise an almost therapeutic repair of the "wounds" inflicted by literal or figurative Absent Fathers, they almost always reaffirm a traditional, presumably lost, masculinity as part of this healing process.

Because I read David Leavitt's Family Dancing as one narrative body, rather than as individual stories, the central protagonist of Leavitt's text is the family and the many forms that the family may take, especially when the patriarch is absent. Significantly, Leavitt frames his collection with two stories about gay male relationships, the intersection of these relationships with the nuclear family, and the ways that these relationships might constitute alternative versions of family. The first story in the collection, "Territory," depicts the attempts of a young gay man, Neil, to forge new territory with his lover Wayne while reentering an old territory, his family's domestic space. Neil's mother tries to adapt to the new role her son's sexuality constructs for her (she joins PFLAG and marches in Pride parades), while his father "hung back, silent; he was absent for that moment as he was mostly absent, a strong absence" (2). In the story's most painful moment, Neil attempts to draw together old and new by placing his arm around his mother on one side and his lover on the other, but his mother resists, claiming, "I am very tolerant... But I can only take so much" (25). The tale ends with the lovers return to their home, hoping for a future in which the old territory can be left behind and a new territory — a new family — can be forged.

Leavitt's collection concludes with the story "Dedicated," in which two lovers negotiate their roles with each other and the female friend who brought them together. The tale depicts the struggles of three people who are still "dedicated" to a traditional hierarchy, or a tradition of hierarchy, in interpersonal relationships, as they forge new territory. The story takes place in the home of Nathan's parents who are conspicuously and perpetually absent. Thus, in both of these framing narratives, either the father or the patriarchal substitute — the family — is missing. Nearly all of the stories in between contain a father who is absent due to divorce, death, car accident, or assertion of sexuality. In fact, the absent patriarch compels the action in almost every tale as the drama and the conflict center on what remains after the father has left.

Leavitt's work effectively illustrates Kaja Silverman's claim that patriarchal culture needs to place its "faith above all else in the unity of the family" (15-16). Leavitt's family is a potent inherited cultural narrative that does not die even when divorce or death have ostensibly destroyed it. Instead, it remains as a shell of rituals best exemplified by the "scripting" of roles depicted in the story "The Lost Cottage" and the ritualized marriage of "Danny in Transit." "The Lost Cottage" begins with gay son Mark comparing the sight of his divorced parents shucking corn to the opening scene of a play he had once imagined writing. Eventually, Mark's family finds itself repeating its yearly gathering in much the same way a play is repeated night after night on stage. Mark, his mother and his siblings cling to this stale script; however, when his father leaves the family briefly to visit his new girlfriend, his absence foregrounds both his discovery of a new script and the remaining family's reliance upon the old script. In "Danny in Transit," Danny's parents initially live a ritualized existence of marital bliss, evidenced by Danny's mother preparations of candlelight dinners for her husband, Allen, who believed that "when a man got back to the house in the evening he deserved time alone with his wife as a reward for his labors" (98). The first sign of familial collapse occurs when Allen fails to come home for the ritual meal. Later, Allen responds to Danny's memory of those dinners by explaining "your mother and I believed in something that was wrong for us" (103). Although a "Father," Allen can dismantle such rituals with little personal consequence, his action has traumatic effects on the family members who lack the ability to define rituals and
roles, evidenced by Danny’s mother’s emotional breakdown, and Danny’s retreat into a world of daydreams.

Leavitt emphasizes family roleplays and rituals in order to illustrate their binding nature, and he demonstrates the power and limits of such roleplays most effectively in the culminating tale “Dedicated.” Andrew and Nathan’s romantic relationship is constructed around which role each will play — dominant or submissive. Andrew explains at one point, “I’m not supposed to put him in his place. I’m not supposed to do that” (195). Andrew’s statement reflects a lack of agency that holds true for both men: Nathan is as bound to his role of aggressor; Andrew to his passive role. Andrew explains that during their first intimate encounter, “it was understood that he was more experienced and he would make the first move” (196). In part, Leavitt illustrates the difficulty of constructing new forms of male intimacy that do not rely on heteronormative models which are based on essentialized gender dichotomies that stipulate that one partner is the “masculine” aggressor; the other, the “feminine” submissive. Leavitt’s characters cling to tradition because no alternatives seem possible in light of their adherence to inherited conceptions of masculinity. For example, Andrew and Nathan’s primary mode of intimate connection is “battle,” in which they use Celia as a mediating figure. Thus, they participate in a tradition in which, as Eve Sedgwick and Gayle Rubin have discussed, a chosen female mediates between men who are cementing their homosocial/homoerotic bonds. Celia comments at one point that “her happiness with Nathan and Andrew depended upon Nathan and Andrew being unhappy with each other” (204). Leavitt’s story illustrates what can occur when one tries to forge new relationship patterns, within a deeply internalized hegemonic heteronormative masculinity. While “Territory” ends with a sense of hope for the future, “Dedicated” concludes with a sense that we remain caught in the clutches of the past.

In his collection, Leavitt interrogates the gay subject’s complicity, conscious or not, with his cultural inheritance despite all attempts to break free from the constraints of such inheritance. The most disturbing implication of his collection is not that the nuclear family breaks down or needs to be restructured, but that such restructuring has little effect given the patriarchal legacy of power relations reflected in and inflicted by the ritualized hierarchies that tend to shape all forms of interpersonal relationships — familial, romantic, gay or straight. It is not surprising that those characters who seem to struggle the least are those fathers, absent to varying degrees, who motivate the action in these tales. Gay or straight, these fathers can construct new lives for themselves, while still exerting emotional and sometimes financial control over the family. Leavitt’s representations also suggest that attempts to repair the wounds these fathers inflict leads either to destruction (Danny and his mother) or to a reaffirmation of traditional gender roles (Nathan and Andrew). His stories reflect the desire to configure new roles but detail the near impossibly of the task. Where Kaja Silverman suggests that we put our faith in the family and the adequacy of the male subject, Leavitt’s collection reveals both the inadequacy of this faith is and dearth of alternatives we seem to have.

Leavitt’s depiction of the subject’s investment in “roleplaying” of the power hierarchies reinforced by such roleplays, and of the relation between such roleplaying and the Absent Father foreshadow the Daddy in the Daddy/Son roleplaying and iconography that has proliferated within the gay community at large, and especially within the “Leather” and “Bear” sub-cultures. Given that the Daddy’s increasing presence parallels that of contemporary masculinity studies, it is tempting to assert that Daddy/Son roleplays and Daddy representations serve as an attempt, via fantasy, to “heal” the wounds of the Absent Father. But if this is the case, we must ask how this effort at healing differs from others — for example, from mythopoetic healing efforts.

In many ways, the Daddy provides a useful answer to the Absent Father. Most representations within erotic fiction, film and art reflect a desire for a “father” who is emotionally and physically present, and thus the Daddy provides all that actual fathers in our culture cannot. Richard Mohr’s analysis of hypermasculinity offers useful insights into the Daddy figure and its potential for addressing the wounds inflicted by the Absent Father. Mohr asserts that “hypermasculine” representations like the Daddy challenge dominant ideologies of masculinity by appropriating the icons of masculinity and male authority (jocks, leather, motorcycles, uniforms) and transporting them into the realm of gay male sexual experience. This appropriation effaces the boundary between “appropriate” masculinity such as sports and war, and “inappropriate” or “failed” masculinity such as gay male sexual experience. Following the lines of Mohr’s reasoning, then, the Daddy/Son roleplays reflect both a desire for patriarchal authority (traditional masculinity) and a revision of this authority. The very act of eroticizing the father/son role could revise or at least challenge traditional conceptions of authority by foregrounding both the desired attributes of masculinity and numerous gender attributes that have been excluded from the category of the masculine.

Not surprisingly, however, the Daddy figure also often appears as the “phallic” incarnate and shares some disturbing characteristics with the mythopoetic resurrection of the Earth Father. Many mythopoetic
scholars, like Aaron Kipnis in *Knight Without Armor*, seek a more “authentic” masculinity by turning to ancient cultures, tribal practices and icons that constitute a resurrection of the Earth Father, the missing male principle whose purpose, function and relation to the Earth Mother (note the heteronormative underpinnings) have become culturally misunderstood. The mythopoetic emphasis on Earth Fathers reflects both the significance of the phallus for these scholars and a deeply embedded castration anxiety. Kipnis acknowledges, for example, that he instinctively knew “the phallus was holy” (64), and he later explains that:

the heroic male in quest of strength cut away his softness. With it he also lost his sensitivity. Life was diminished. Feelings became less rich. The feminized male, in cutting away his hardness, lost his fierceness, his capacity for committed action and success in the world. So we must be careful (97).

Clearly, the phallus has been lost and must be recovered. Thus Kipnis strives to resurrect “the phallic, half-animal, magical, wild, dancing, music-making man” (121). This effort at resurrection has cultural precedent, however.

Kaja Silverman describes the primacy of the signifier phallus/penis in our culture, contending that “within our dominant fiction the phallus/penis equation occupies absolute pride of place” (16). He argues that the dominant fiction:

calls upon the male subject to see himself ... only through the mediation of images of an unimpaired masculinity. It urges both the male and the female subject ... to deny all knowledge of male castration by believing in the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father (42).

Thus, traditional masculinity often emerges “as a fetish for covering over the castration upon which male subjectivity is grounded” (Silverman, 47). Silverman’s argument, problematic as some critics may find it,12 suggests that the mythopoetic embrace of the phallus to repair the wound of the Absent Father reinscribes patriarchal culture. Rather than explore or contest the many cultural and institutional dynamics that constitute male subjectivity as always desiring the phallus that is lacked, men’s movement scholars fetishize traditional masculinity to cover over a threatening lack that is constituted by this gender norm. Like the mythopoetic Earth Father, the Daddy figure, despite his hypermasculine qualities and critique, often merely serves as a fetish object, covering over a lack and thereby perpetuating the dominant fiction. He reflects a lost masculinity that can somehow now be returned.

For an illustration of the Daddy’s conflicted nature, consider the introduction to Colt Studios Special Issue *Oh Daddy*, a photo collection that includes Daddies ranging in age from about 20-40:13

**Big Daddies**

Oh yes, they’ll take you in hand all right. If you deserve it. Usually they’re there when you need them to help, to lean on, to be stroked by (and if you’re very good you can sit on their laps, but you have to be very good to do that). They’re patient and understanding men with strong and enveloping arms, and always masculine. Such are the extraordinary examples of machismo we’ve assembled for this special edition.

**(Description of models)**

So sit up straight, finish your dinner, don’t talk back—and just wait till your father gets home. He’s going to give you such a licking.

The final pun, which eroticizes paternal violence, reflects the tendency to confl ate the Daddy figure’s disciplinary authority with emotional and sexual attention. The descriptions of these men as patient, understanding (i.e., emotionally present) and yet also physically powerful suggest that the fantasy Daddy fills the primary absence so often attributed to actual fathers in our culture. Nor should we ignore the final image in which the son sits entrenched in American domesticity eagerly awaiting the arrival of a father who is only available, apparently, in fantasy. Here we see a crucial characteristic of the Daddy/Son scenario: the voluntary and eager submission to disciplinary, patriarchal authority, a submission that opposes, but also evokes, moments of involuntary submission in childhood. Even in this fantasy, the eroticism that strives to mask the implied violence, authority, and domination clearly relies upon these attributes to elicit or provide pleasure.

Still, in light of Silverman’s analysis, I would ask in what ways do desire and identification, as configured in the Daddy, “...function as mechanisms for circumventing or even repudiating the dominant fiction, whose most privileged term is the phallus” (2). Certainly, the performative venue in which the Daddy is often configured exposes patriarchal authority as a construction. The Daddy is a role that can be, and often is, inhabited by men, by women and by individuals of varying ages. At the same time, the question of consent to such authority is
particularly problematic in these products as they often incorporate physical abuse or rape fantasies. The line between fantasy and reality becomes especially tenuous when discussing sexual roleplay as opposed to the consumption of textual fantasy. One self-defined “Daddy,” for example, insisted upon the healing effects that his “Son” experienced by renewing the pain of his “father’s” abuse and then receiving the intimacy and affection that his father never offered but that his new “Daddy” could.15

Such examples foreground the question of whether the Daddy signifies a form of intimacy between men that can only occur within the framework of sexual fantasy and roleplay. If so, then we can clearly see a limit to the efficacy of such roleplay for revising social definitions of masculinity. While the fantasy and roleplay might enable individuals to heal, at least for a time, to what extent can this healing be translated from the fantasy space into a social and political reality? Mike Dash points out that the tension between profeminist and mythopoetic studies results from differing emphases: the mythopoetic movement stresses the individual without considering politics, and the profeminist movement focuses on the social and political implications of masculinity studies while de-emphasizing individual progress (355). Dash details the benefits of integrating the two approaches, and his exploration of the tension between individual and collective progress speaks directly to the tension between the Daddy and the Absent Father: To what extent can individual healing (e.g., Daddy fantasies and roleplays) serve as a basis for collective political action/change? Does individual healing limit collective action/change? We have to ask if the Daddy deconstructs patriarchal masculinity, if he resists or contests cultural inheritance, or if his vested interest in authority and discipline reinscribe the very ideologies of masculinity that lead to the Absent Father, to the barriers to intimacy between males. In short, does the Daddy constitute a step toward a new legacy of masculinity for men, or does he simultaneously mask or even reify the legacy of the Absent Father?

I maintain that the Daddy figure falls into the same cycle of wound and repair that characterizes the Absent Father. While the Daddy might, via sexual fantasy and roleplay, allow the individual subject a chance to heal the wounds of the Absent Father, and offer some latitude to contest traditional notions of masculinity, ultimately he can only reaffirm the traditional masculinity he challenges because, especially within these erotic representations, he is consistently torn between contradictory potentials. Although this figure does strive to efface essentialized gender constructs by melding traditionally “masculine” attributes (aggressive and authoritative) with traditionally “feminine” (gentle and nurturing), unfortunately, as is the case with so many men’s movement scholars, this melding often results in foregrounding and affirming these constructed dichotomies. Aaron Kipnis’ study, for example, seeks to revise what he calls “feminized masculinity” however, his uncritical use of the term “feminized” reflects the essentialized and dichotomized conception of gender so often replicated in representations of the Absent Father.16 Kipnis also insists that the Absent Father syndrome has “aggravated the feminization of men” (78). However, profeminists have argued the inverse — i.e., that the men’s movement reliance on gender essentialism produces a tremendous fear of flight from the “feminine” as the means to regain masculinity (Kimmel and Kauffman 23, 27). Ironically, it is often such a fear of femininity that leads to barriers between men, emotional distance, and other wounds associated with the Absent Father. Significantly, in a number of Daddy representations, the effort to reverse roles does little to challenge traditional hierarchies because the Son takes on the role and the power of the “Father” in order to “feminize” and/or victimize the new submissive Daddy.17

The Daddy’s duality is amply illustrated in the publication Doing it for Daddy: Short and Sexy Fiction about a Very Forbidden Fantasy, a collection of short fiction Daddy fantasies in which Daddies are young/old, gay/straight, male/female. While the stories reflect many of the basic tensions so often evident in Daddy erotica, I find Pat Califia’s introduction to be the most compelling aspect of the collection because it reflects the Daddy’s crucial connections to the Absent Father, while it foregrounds and attempts to rationalize his split nature. Califia claims that:

Doing it for Daddy is a twisty fast ride on the roller coaster of polymorphous perverse, gender-fucking, role-playing fantasies. Bet you’ll try to get off more than once. . . . Perhaps you’d better strap yourself down just as a safety precaution. Oh and don’t make any assumptions about the “real” sex or sexual orientation of any of the authors of these stories. Just grab the lube, let your libido stop apologizing, and loosen up that elbow (9).

Although these stories are written by men and women and span a range of sexual orientations, including female Daddies, it is notable that the audience Califia posits in her description of lube, libido and loose elbow seems to be male. Yet this is not really surprising for, although she acknowledges the impact of absent or bad fathers on women, the introduction claims that the Daddy’s primary significance is for gay men and
is manifested in the relation between young gay men and older gay men (a mentoring relationship that she sees being devastated by AIDS and that parallels the mentoring process mythopoetic studies often advocate). Califia’s Daddy here is all about the need to salvage masculinity before it is destroyed by the “demonization of men that has been an ugly counterpart to the liberation of women” (13). She insists that these stories do not romanticize incest but are instead about the “unfinished business” of “integrating the vulnerable child-self with the adult ego and libido; and about receiving what we need from our partners and caretakers” (11-12). Significantly, she reveals our all-too-common commitment to traditional gender dichotomies when she asserts that becoming an adult meant “choosing Dad instead of Mom, the world instead of the Home, action and ambition over attachment and intimacy” (12). Of course, as she says, for most of us, Dad was either literally or figuratively absent, and thus we could not understand this choice between world and home that we were forced to make. The Daddy figure and the Daddy fantasy can thus allow one to confront and explore that absence and all that it signifies, and in many instances I am sure that they do.

Still, Harry Brod has shown that many men’s movement studies effectively blame the victim (in this case the sons) for the fathers’ distance (he cites Bly’s claim about the son’s collaboration with the mother against the father) and concomitantly deny the father’s accountability (94). Similarly, while these fantasy roleplays might enable a dramatization in which the father accounts for his abandonment (among other sins), the son still takes on the burden of effecting the repair (perhaps he has no other option) by seducing the father or by voluntarily submitting to Dad’s authority or by reversing roles of victimization and becoming the son who “outfathers” the father and asserts control, power, and dominance. In all cases, traditionally masculine attributes are reaffirmed. Despite Califia’s claims that “there are as many scripts as there are boys and girls,” and that “what’s important is that people are being nurtured, pleased and bonding with one another” (15), most of this introduction—in fact the literal center of this introduction—attempts to salvage a cultural “script” that has figured prominently in the creation of the condition for which these other scripts become necessary.

Listen to her description of the essence of masculinity:

it is the choice to be gentle even when one is stronger than others; to care for one’s dependents and nurture the young; to devise rites of passage and train our charges to pass through them successfully; to help those who are in trouble; to work hard and perform well; to provide food even in a time of scarcity; to deal with problems or emergencies in a courageous and effective manner; to mount a defense and, if necessary, get hurt or even die in the process of protecting the people who are depending upon and helping you (13-14).

The move in this passage from the gentleness and nurturing of the opening to the stereotypical masculine traits of problem solving and food provision to the glorification of the martial ideal paradoxically advocates a revised and reinscribed traditional masculinity. Because Califia’s introduction implies that “masculinity” and these specific characteristics should be valued in men and women, she is, to some extent, contesting traditional gender assignments. Yet, her uncritical acceptance of the traditional elements of masculinity ignores the likelihood that the script she salvages will perpetuate the conditions, the wounds, the Daddy fantasy supposedly heals. Like the mythopoetic studies, Califia’s exploration reveals the difficulty of even imagining gender roles that don’t conform to a set of conventional attributes.

The mythopoetic turn to the Earth Father suggests that the only way to forge something new and “authentic” is to turn to the past and resurrect a masculinity that has been presumably lost. In a curious way, the Daddy erotica and the Daddy/Son roleplays seem to advocate the same kind of turn. While consumers of Daddy erotica and roleplay participants do not turn to ancient tribal Earth Fathers, they do look “forward” to a new kind of masculinity by returning to a more traditional, hypermasculine conception of masculinity in which a dominant figure overpowers another for the purposes of mutual pleasure. Is it any surprise that Califia discusses the desire to “turn the tables on that mean old man” by relishing the fact that he is now the “cocksucker” that he accused his son of being (14)? Is it a surprise that dear old dad, the hypermasculine faghasher, now provides a space of nurturing reassurance, and that we despise and wish to victimize the figure, yet still long for his caring and nurturing? While Califia insists that violence and oppression are signs of failed masculinity (13), and while her rhetoric tries to strip terms like “cocksucker” of any violent connotation, many of the erotic stories in her anthology and elsewhere reflect fantasies in which “Daddies” and “Sons” take turns dominating each other and, in extreme cases, victimizing each other. The rhetoric within these stories almost always eroticizes pain, violence and domination, even in the stories in which the Son seeks out the sexual act.

In many ways the Daddy embodies the schizophrenia that results from attempts to reject or revise a cultural “script” that continues to inform the constitution of the contemporary male’s cultural inheritance, and this informs, in both productive and problematic ways, the meth-
nvis about the mythopoets can be applied to these queer representations. In other words, rather than merely emphasizing and indulging in the wounds inflicted by the Absent Father, we might instead examine how the articulated responses to this figure speak to the need for radically new conceptions of masculinity that do not merely replicate tradition. But to do so means we must first recognize the underlying assumptions that evoke these representations, and we must remember Clatterbaugh’s insistence that while wounds are real, they are always embedded in social and institutional contexts.

I hope to have demonstrated that while the stigma of the Absent Father may inhibit scholarly investigations into this figure and his impact on queer culture, the culture itself is highly invested in articulating this figure and its impacts. Thus, while this figure is certainly important for all who have interest in masculinity and its effects, it remains of particular importance for gay men who often silence serious discussions of the Absent Father, while simultaneously enacting pleasurable but problematic sexual fantasies as a means of dealing with his legacy. These representations suggest that rather than merely roleplay to address the Absent Father, and rather than fantasize about an idealized form of masculinity to satisfy sexual and emotional desires, we could use these very bodily and emotional experiences as the basis to understand, and hopefully revise, the social and political processes that privilege traditional masculinity. Although Leavitt’s work illustrates the difficulty of individual efforts to revise gender scripts, his stories and the Daddy figure also indicate the desire to achieve change. While it is tempting to read these representations as affirming the inability to create change, I think we should instead read them as foregrounding the need to reevaluate how we approach masculinity studies.

On the one hand, scholars need to recognize all the voices that contribute to the discourses on masculinity, especially those disturbingly popular voices whose studies perpetuate the cycle of wound and repair that these representations illustrate. On the other hand, we also might work to bridge the divide between individual healing and collective progress. Indulging in personal exploration of wounds can perhaps help to “heal” the individual, but, as a collective, if we hope to challenge the cultural factors that create these wounds, we need to recognize what these representations of wounds and the efforts to repair them, tell us: in Clatterbaugh’s terms, the desire for power, especially for “institutionalized social and political power” likely constitutes the cause “of the costs of masculinity” (“Mythopoetic Foundations” 57). If we really want to see change, we need to look beyond the “Daddy” and try to imagine the unimaginable: gender constructs that don’t replicate traditional hierarchies; a masculinity that is not, at its core, about power; perhaps even a world without masculinity.

Is such a world utopian? Probably. Is such a masculinity just another fantasy, at least for the moment? Most likely. However, it is a fan-
tasy that looks forward to something unimagined, rather than backward to a tradition whose legacy we know all too well. What would such masculinity look like? I am not sure I know, and I am not sure we can know at this time. As long as masculinity remains a cultural code for power, it may be that all we can hope for is a more equal distribution of that power or a more equitable balance between those characteristics traditionally associated with that power and those precluded from that power. Still, examining figures like the Daddy results in a recognition of the hierarchical nature of power relations associated with masculinity and thus speaks to the need for gender scripts that resist hierarchy. Profeminists insist that we look to institutional and social contexts; however, within our patriarchal culture, the majority of these contexts remain hierarchical and thus offer little help. Nonetheless, rather than giving up or returning to tradition again and again, we can recognize the cycle of wound and repair, recognize how unimaginable the alternatives seem to be, and use this knowledge as we continue to assess the evolution of masculinity and struggle to envision alternatives that do not merely replicate tradition.

Notes

1 Henry Abelove reports that although Freud was relatively sympathetic to homosexuals and did not consider homosexuality an illness, American psychoanalysts working after Freud insisted that homosexuality be decreed a mental illness. Irving Bieber, claiming that all psychoanalytic theories “assume that homosexuality is psychopathogenic,” argued that homosexuality “derived primarily from a certain sort of bad family situation: a dominating mother, a cold father” (390). However, Michael Warner argues that Freud’s discussions of homosexuality include heteronormative assumptions that posit a present father figure as necessary for proper development of the ego-ideal, a development that eventually culminates in the “normal” condition of heterosexuality (Warner, “Homo-Narcissism”).

2 See, for example, Guy Corneau, Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity: Aaron R. Kipnis, Knights Without Armor: A Practical Guide for Men in Quest of Masculine Soul; Moore and Gilette, King, Warrior, Magician, Lover. These and other men’s movement assessments of masculinity base themselves loosely on Jung’s heteronormative archetypes and complexes, e.g., the male anima and the female animus, the mother/father complex. While many of these texts may not explicitly link improper development to homosexuality, they often imply this, and their accounts of masculinity cannot accommodate homosexual desire. These texts suggest that the lack of father results in an overdeveloped female principle or, in Corneau’s terms, mother complex. By implication then, many of these texts perpetuate the cultural myth that dominant mothering and weak or Absent Fathers “cause” homosexuality in men.

3 From personal experience I can attest to the fact that many of these “ministries” posit lack of proper male role model as the cause of homosexuality.

4 For example, in their chapter on “Motherbound Males,” Vogt and Sirridge claim: “For a good many homosexual males, their relationships with their fathers was so absent that some of their body longings are transferred to another male. In so doing, the homosexual male achieves some of the lost bonding with a male substitute and keeps the mother relationship safe, constant and unchallenged” (39).

5 Most studies of contemporary masculinity claim that the oppressive effects of masculinity have become most pronounced for men since WWII. In his introduction to Alexander Mitscherlich’s Society Without the Father, Robert Bly describes the contemporary “sibling society” (one without a patriarch) as “only forty to fifty years old” (xiv). Also, Vogt and Sirridge explain that the Absent Father resulted, at least in part, from the fact that men, since the 1940’s, have been sent off to war, to work, to the club or lodge. (10). Since WWII, American culture has also seen an increased development of both a gay/lesbian community and a visible, although markedly
shifting, gay identity. (As just one example, see John D'Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970.) Drawing upon a theoretical model offered by critics such as Eve Sedgwick, Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks, we need to consider whether the Absent Father paradigm, when examined within its historical context (e.g., the McCarthy era to Stonewall to the Reagan Bush era), signifies the inverse of its own claims. For example, has the pathologizing of desire and intimacy between men caused, or at least contributed to, an Absent Father phenomenon that has had profound impacts on male subjectivity (to some degree regardless of sexual identity)?

6 In adapting Kenneth Clatterbaugh's terms "profeminist" and "men's movement," I am defining the former as those assessments which challenge a traditional hegemonic masculinity and the latter as those that often seek a return — conscious or not — to normative conventions. Kenneth Clatterbaugh's *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity* divides contemporary theories into: Conservative, Profeminist, Men's Rights Movement, Spiritualists, Socialists and "Views from Outside" (i.e. gay and men of color). For the purposes of this essay, I am placing the "men's rights movement," "mythopoetic men's movement" and "spiritualists" into the category of mythopoetic approaches. Clatterbaugh explains that his categories overlap, and mine clearly do as well.

7 Nonetheless, I wonder if work produced prior to Jardine's 1987 challenge has been overlooked, especially work that does not adhere to an appropriate agenda or to an assumed level of theoretical sophistication. The 1995 publication of *Constructing Masculinity* makes this question all the more pertinent, since the collection as a whole fails to acknowledge or incorporate any work done by either "profeminist" scholars or "mythopoetic" writers. As one of the contributors explains, "the authors were asked [by the editors] to imagine the goals of a critical men's movement" (Fung 292), as if such a movement did not already exist.

8 This resistance is somewhat understandable. Alice Jardine suggests that men have said nothing yet, or nothing has been said as it should be said, which raises the issue of whether men's voices will be heard by women, feminists, academics, unless men are saying what these overlapping groups wish to hear. This is a clear concern for many of the often hostile men's movement writers, especially the men's rights advocates. In her introduction to *Women Respond to the Men's Movement*, for example, Kay Leigh Hagan, reiterates Kathleen Carlin's observation that "gatherings where 'men talk to men about men' are nothing if not ordinary in our society" (xiii). While her point is understandable, it also ignores the fact that male gatherings in which men discuss their experience as gendered subjects are hardly the staple of culturally sanctioned male bonding experiences.

9 Clatterbaugh makes this marginalization explicit in his chapter "A View from

Outside: Gay and Black Men Respond" (*Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity*). See also Tim Edwards, "Beyond Sex and Gender: Masculinity, Homosexuality and Social Theory." This is not to ignore studies of masculinity pertaining to men of color (e.g. Wallace, Hooks, Reed, Gates), or collections that strive to address gay men or men of color (e.g. Morgan's *Discovering Men*, Segal's *Slow Motion*, Boone and Cadden's *Engendering Men*, Kimmel's *Men's Lives*). I am simply suggesting that "mainstream" studies of masculinity, and of the Absent Father, generally have heterosexual and race-specific bases.

10 Steven Seidman's essay, "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes," offers an excellent summary of the debates surrounding gay culture and gay identity. I borrow the terms "inherited" and "reproduced" culture from Michael Warner's paper "69: Sex in Public."

11 See Sedgwick, *Between Men* and Rubin, "Trafficking in Women."

12 See for example Abigail Solomon-Godeau's "Male Trouble."

13 This is actually quite common. In many of the magazines that cater to Daddy/Son fantasy, the personal ads (which constitute 50 percent of the magazines) reflect the fact that Daddy is more image, behavior and attitude than physical type or age range.

14 While such rape fantasies are not the norm, many Daddy stories found in *Drummer* and *Handjobs* magazines incorporate violence and even rape. See, for example, Randy Boyd's "Rest Room Romp," or Tom Banks' "New Boys in the Cell Block," both from *Handjobs*.

15 This casual interview occurred after I presented an initial, rough version of the current essay at the conference: *Contested Sexualities III*, SUNY Binghamton, March 1994.

16 Although he claims that his use of "feminized" should not be mistaken for "feminine" (77) but instead only reflects men's separation (often via women and the women's movement) from "their traditional earthy masculinity" (78), the characteristics he lists as "feminized" reflect "feminine" gender stereotypes: soft, submissive, gentle, gatherer, consort. Consider also Kipnis's later descriptions of nature in which "Mountains have a thrusting erect maleness about them... while valleys have an embracing, nurturing, inviting fertile femininity." (111). Throughout *The Politics of Manhood*, profeminist critics document the rampant essentialism evident in the works of mythopoets, especially Bly, Jed Diamond's concern about excessive academic treatments notwithstanding (Diamond 316), many of the men's movement texts could benefit from a more extensive theoretical understanding of gender, especially Butler's theorization of gender as performance.
17 The majority of the Daddy/Son erotica found in Handjobs, Drummer, Doing it for Daddy and on the Internet reflect a Son who willingly submits to the Daddy. However, some stories depict a Son who either has to force Daddy to recognize his own desire, or has to "turn the tables" on Dad by forcing him into the passive role. More significantly, the rhetoric used is almost always one of dominance and submission, and the pleasure often seems connected to watching Dad abdicate some of his power to his Son.

18 To some extent, I would agree, especially in Califia's collection. In Handjobs and on the Net, however, the incest is pretty clear. In many instances, the fantasy is about a literal boy, not a figurative role an adult male or female inhabits.

19 As just one example, see Phil Christian's "Truckerdad Part 2," in which the Son describes the pain/pleasure he experiences as his Dad spanks him, fucks him and nearly chokes him.

Works Cited


—. "Mythopoetic Foundations." Kimmel Politics 44-63.


Edwards, Tim. "Beyond Sex and Gender: Masculinity, Homosexuality and Social Theory," in Men, Masculinities and Social Theory. Eds. Jeff Hearn and David Morgan. London: Unwin and Hyman
Schopp

Lt., 1990. 110-123.