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Homosocial Spaces and Canonicity in the Victorian and Edwardian Eras

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of homosocial space in the Victorian Era as it pertains to canonicity issues in literature. Homosocial space simply means that space which men set aside, such as in men's-only clubs or situations such as the relationship of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, in which women play a limited role, if at all. Yet, this notion of men-only spaces created problems for the works vying to become canonical literature—not because of the exclusion of women, but for the ambivalence felt toward this separation of the sexes. Underlying this ambivalence is a fear of homosexuality; yet, these spaces also violate Matthew Arnold's and Thomas Carlyle's views toward industry. Often, the men in these novels fail to act, whether heroically or artistically. Matthew Arnold's works "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and "The Study of Poetry" usefully navigate the trail toward canonicity, at least for the Victorian Era. Using Arnold's notion and the prevailing social attitudes toward masculinity and enterprise, this paper examines the problems of canonicity for Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

Introduction

Texts that have homosocial spaces as a central component can pose a problem for those texts' canonicity, especially in such periods as the Victorian and Edwardian Eras. The problem arises because these homosocial spaces violate the accepted standards of morality and enterprise for the era. Thomas Carlyle's famous attitude toward work as a cure for any ill pervaded the time period. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Maurice* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* all depict homosocial spaces, while varying in their attitudes toward them. By possessing these spaces—and, in the cases of *Dorian Gray* and *Maurice*, emphasizing them—all three novels are hampered in their bid for canonicity. This paper will illustrate that, according to the sentiments of Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, these three works fall short of canonicity for two reasons: their use of homosocial spaces appear to value "being over doing" (*Victorian People and Ideas* 294), violating the era's industrious nature where action is required to produce greatness; the motif of homosexuality underscoring at least *Dorian Gray* and *Maurice* result in an emotivism on the part of critics that forces them, because of their own morality, to marginalize works which violate that morality.

Body

Critics, as well as writers, have long recognized the need for a classification system, delineating varying strata of quality, against which to measure subsequent works. Furthermore, criteria must be established to include or displace works from the canon, or list of established great works. Matthew Arnold states we must have a level of greatness in mind while reading other works in order to "govern our estimate of what we read" ("Study of Poetry" 301). He adds that, "if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence" (300). The canon serves as an "aristocracy of texts," according to John Guillory ("Ideology of Canon-Formation" 339). This sets up the canon as both a tradition and a barometer with which to measure new texts. Using the past to create a gauge by which subsequent works can be measured fulfills the destiny of poetry of which Arnold speaks. Thus criticism, in creating canons, "tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail" ("Function of Criticism at the Present Time" 141). These ideas emerge from the revered types, styles and subjects of the era, and are as politically as they are meritoriously motivated. Paul Lauter adds that, "debating the canon turns out to be a symbolic way of arguing a variety of other social and political issues—basically, who has power and how it is exercised" (*Canons and Contexts* x). Charles Altieri echoes this politically motivated reading of canon formation by saying that, "any desire to put literature to work as a social force would require us self-consciously to build a canon that serve our concrete, 'political' commitments" ("An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon" 43).

Altieri defines canons as “ideological banners for social groups: social groups propose them as a forms of self-definition, and they engage other propositions to test limitations while exposing the contradictions and incapacities of competing groups” (43). Therefore, canons not only establish great texts but work to exclude inferior ones.

The inclusion of homosocial spaces can be problematic for texts vying for canonicity because of the political perception of those spaces by critics of the time. Homosocial spaces are where men are at liberty to socialize free of overtly social and political restraints placed upon them by Victorian and Edwardian societies. Clubs, racetracks, and other social venues give men places that “exalt being over doing,” in the words of Richard Altick (*Victorian People and Ideas* 294). Altick is describing the Aesthetic Movement here, but the phrase can be applied to how these homosocial spaces were viewed by critics of the time because the Aesthetic Movement is inextricably linked with these homosocial spaces; Matthew Arnold could be giving a definition of the function of homosocial spaces in *Dorian Gray*, *Maurice* and *Thirty-Nine Steps* when he writes about poetry that fails to achieve greatness. Arnold writes:

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance, in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done.
(“Preface to Poems”)

The inability or disinclination to take action denotes failure. Arnold adds that literature which places people in “mental distress,” as in *Maurice* and *Dorian Gray* due to the characters’ sexuality, or their perception of danger toward their country, as in *Thirty-Nine Steps*, without a “vent in action” produces no “poetical enjoyment.” The two former works do not produce poetical enjoyment, but *Thirty-Nine Steps*—according to the criteria of Arnold—does because it provokes the hero to take action and alleviate that mental distress. Hence, *Thirty-Nine Steps* fits one politically motivated definition of a canonical work while the other two do not.

Thomas Carlyle would dismiss books with homosocial spaces from classic status because they violate his principle of action being required to produce greatness. These spaces are not compatible to the “man of action” Carlyle venerates. He lays out his beliefs of what constitutes greatness in his essay “On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History.” In this work, Carlyle states:

I confess, I have no notion of a truly great man that could not be all sorts of men. The Poet who could merely sit on a chair, and compose stanzas, would never make a stanza worth much. He could not sing the Heroic warrior, unless he himself were at least a Heroic warrior too. I fancy there is in him the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher;--in one or the other degree, he could have been, he is all these. (“On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History”)

Clubs, artists’ studios, universities and other homosocial spaces fail to rouse an individual to greatness, as these places are for excluding one from greater society in order to socially interact, rather than act in the Carlylean sense for the betterment of society. Indeed, clubs and other homosocial spaces embody those people like Oscar Wilde who—to Thomas Carlyle— “merely sit in a chair, and compose stanzas” (“On Heroes”). Matthew Arnold echoes Carlyle’s emphasis on action for greatness and extends it to greatness in literature. Arnold states, “What are the eternal objects of Poetry among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves” (“Preface to Poems”). For Carlyle and Arnold, people must act to achieve greatness. Homosocial spaces, by Richard Altick’s definition, value being over action, and are thus refused acknowledgement as places where men or works can become great.

Carlyle believes that great men need to be productive to society and still adhere to that society’s mores. He writes that a potentially great man, “will read the world and its laws; the world with its laws will be there to be read. What the world, on this matter, shall permit and bid is, as we said, the most important fact about the world” (“On Heroes”). In other words, the book must reflect not only the great writing and themes of the best works that preceded it, but also the values of the society that produced it. T. S. Eliot agrees with Carlyle in believing that an ideal should be advanced—one that people can emulate in literature. He writes,
[I]f the poet can portray something superior to contemporary practice, it is not in the way of anticipating some later, and quite different code of behavior, but by an insight into what the conduct of his own people at his own time might be, at its best. (“What is a Classic?”)

Realism has no place in Eliot's canon, as it deals with issues as they are, not as they "might be." This disqualifies Dorian Gray and his debauchery and decadence, as well as Maurice and his then-criminal acts of homosexuality. Both of these lifestyles are not permitted by the Victorian/Edwardian Age as Carlyle meant the word. Moreover, Richard Hannay of *Thirty-Nine Steps* seemingly violates this permissible dictum in eluding established societal law and continuing to do so until the end of the novel. Yet, Carlyle uses the word *bid* to describe a sort of destiny that the potential hero must fulfill, a quest that society bids him to follow. Hannay's deviance from strict adherence to the law actually permits him to fulfill this quest and is therefore acceptable in the Carlylean sense. Society dictates that England is made aware of the threat of German Imperialism and Hannay's efforts lead to precisely this knowledge. While going outside the strictures of society to elude personal culpability in the agent Scudder's murder, Hannay actually pursues justice of a larger kind—that of national justice. In this way he achieves this portion of Carlyle's catalogue of heroic traits. The characters of Maurice and Dorian Gray fail this test in that both ignore the moral and virtuous path in their stories.

Biases against homosocial spaces are not only politically motivated. Charles Altieri provides another reason why books such as *Dorian Gray* and *Maurice* elude canonicity by portraying homosocial scenes. He states that some criticism contains the "error" of possessing "an emotivism about values" ("Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon" 46). This emotivism is evident when a critic allows personal values and morality to dictate whether or not a work deserves canonical status. An emotional topic such as homosexuality in the Victorian/Edwardian Era, even obliquely referred to in texts, may lead critics such as Eliot and Arnold to ignore a book's otherwise grand style. Thus, no matter the literary merits of the two books, they are excluded from the canon because the critics of the time allow their emotivism to influence their literary judgment. Further, the values that Barbara Herrnstein Smith speaks of permits this exclusion to continue, because critics of today are more interested in explicating texts rather than evaluating why the text is canonical or non-canonical ("Contingencies of Value" 35). Smith describes these values as "the traditional cultural values" of a certain time period that lead a critic to subjectively rather than objectively view a text. ("Contingencies of Value" 6). This emotivism blocks texts with subversive social elements from gaining canonicity.

Dorian Gray also lacks canonicity because the characters deviate from Carlyle's sense of the heroic while relying on homosocial spaces to gratify themselves. Dorian Gray is first seen in an artist's studio, and throughout the novel makes his way through theatres, restaurants, clubs and people's houses in a seemingly haphazard manner. These forays into homosocial spaces are all done for his own gratification, not for an ideal or moral cause. Gray does not do "what the world . . . shall permit or bid," as Carlyle demands of heroes, because he does not take moral action for a "grand cause" ("On Heroes"). Oscar Wilde himself admits that the characters in *Dorian Gray* do not embody the Carlylean ideal. Donald Lawler includes a letter written by Wilde refusing a dinner invitation, citing *Dorian Gray's* completion as an excuse. Wilde writes that, "I have just finished my first long story and am tired out. I am afraid it is rather like my own life—all conversation and no action. I can't describe action; my people sit in chairs and chatter" (*An Inquiry into Oscar Wilde's Revisions* 9). Wilde recognizes the lack of action in his depiction of characters in homosocial spaces.

Besides the lack of action, Wilde's work also suffers from too much association with the Aesthetic Movement and the homosocial spaces inculcated in that movement. Richard Altick writes of the Aesthetic Movement—of which Sir Henry, and subsequently, Dorian, are a part—in *Victorian People and Ideas*. Altick writes that Aesthetes, in order "to replace Carlylean activism, with its insistence upon productive work . . . cultivated a philosophy that exalted being over doing . . . and that was completely amoral and divorced from society's implications" (294). Also, Sir Henry embodies the aristocracy that is allowing the newly developed middle class to overtake them in moral and social responsibility, while they (the aristocracy) spend their time "shooting huge numbers of pheasants in their well-guarded preserves and lounging . . . in town houses resplendent with the kind of ostentatious bad taste that only unlimited money can buy" (Altick 21). Inaction is the enemy. This characteristic of the Aesthetic Movement and the homosocial spaces that are a part of that movement deters the book from canonicity.

Wilde's characters' sexuality is not the immediate reason why the text is excluded from canonicity. Alan Sinfield quotes *Fraser's Magazine* as asking whether works such as Wilde's *Dorian Gray* are written "to brace up manly energy, and promote heroic virtue? Or rather, have they not an evident tendency to effeminate and enfeeble the mind?" (*The Wilde Century* 70). With this emphasis on "energy" versus "effeminate," the magazine provides a glimpse into the demarcation between the sexes as the Victorians—and Edwardians—

see it. They see inaction as being akin to femininity. This is not to say that Victorians automatically view Wilde's characters as homosexual. The dandy or aesthete (such as Lord Henry) is looked upon by that era as having effeminate qualities without being explicitly labeled homosexual. Sinfield quotes Richard Dellamore as saying "Dorian's milieu . . . is homosocial rather than homosexual" (101). Sinfield adds, "to accomplish this theme [of Dorian's corruption by homosocial interaction] it is not necessary for Wilde to make any of his characters homosexual" (100). It is enough that the characters are seen as idle and lacking in moral stability to drive home Wilde's point about the complex relationship between art and morality. It is also enough for the Victorian public, attuned to Carlyle's notion of heroes, to dismiss *Dorian Gray* as lacking in any heroic action or ideals. Therefore, Wilde's novel remains non-canonical.

Maurice initially deviates from canonical criteria by portraying its characters in settings such as the homosocial worlds of the university and aristocratic society. Maurice meets Clive at the university and through that meeting, awakens his own homosexuality. By combining the effeminate homosocial space of the university with the overt depiction of homosexuality, E. M. Forster seeks to break new ground with a text containing themes heretofore unattempted by a major author. T. S. Eliot would reject this attempt because his standard of a great work requires a text to conform to the canon, not change it. Eliot writes that a work must "fit in" in order to be considered against the "standards of the past." He adds that, "its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent"). Smith writes that canons such as the one created by Eliot seek works that fit the social mores and "contingencies of value" of the era from which they evolve. The book has to possess "signs" of its literary ancestors and be a noticeable "spring" from those ancestors ("Contingencies of Value" 34). Smith explains that, to critics like Eliot, "[t]he endurance of a classic canonical author . . . owes not to the alleged transcultural or universal value of his works but, on the contrary, to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture" (34). In other words, Eliot may appear to invite new works into his canon, but by fixing criteria born out of idealism, not objectivity, he effectively closes the canon to unorthodox works such as *Maurice* because it violates the mores and values of the age.

These values of the Victorian and Edwardian periods are queried in *Maurice*. When speaking with a doctor in an attempt to "cure" his homosexuality, Maurice learns that it is a biological, not learned condition. The doctor, Lasker Jones, says that France has laws that permit the union of two men, but England would never do so, because, "England has always been disinclined to accept human nature" (*Maurice* 211). Further, Dr. Jones informs Maurice that "your type was once put to death in England" (211). This sort of trenchant social criticism does not fit in with the "conformity" of Eliot or reflect the "springs" Smith speaks of, since it is altogether a new subject for a major novel. Forster, in Arnold's view, would be "the specialist who has sacrificed too much for too little," since the author sacrifices the popularity and acclaim of works like *Howard's End* and *A Passage to India* to create a work too *outré* for its time ("What is a Classic?"). This viewpoint is borne out by the fact that this novel did not see publication until 1971. Forster's "Terminal Note" at the end of *Maurice*, while it defends his choice of subject matter, also illuminates a way in which the novel deviates from the accepted notions of canonicity. Forster states that "if it [the novel] ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well" (250). This is the type of ending preferred by Victorians in novels depicting other deviators from accepted social standards, such as prostitutes and fallen women. By refusing to adhere to precedent and allowing the homosocial group to be seen to endure and thus, succeed, even in the midst of "immoral" behavior, Forster excludes himself from possible canonicity.

Thirty-Nine Steps, unlike the previous two novels' acceptance of homosocial spaces, acts as an indictment of them and their disinclination to involve people in meaningful action. Thus, the text appears canonical as both a theoretical Carlylean indictment of homosocial spaces and, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith says on the function of texts within the canon, a text which serves to "illuminate and transmit the traditional cultural values" of the era ("Contingencies of Value" 6). The main character, Richard Hannay, is a man who appears to be the ideal candidate for a member of homosocial society. He has money, no need to work and has just arrived back in England after many years of hard labor in South Africa. Yet, Hannay detests the homosocial lifestyle. The enjoyment he initially seeks consists mainly of these homosocial spaces and Hannay, as a man of action, quickly grows bored. He states, "I was tired of seeing sights, and in less than a month I had had enough of restaurants and theatres and race meetings. I had no real pal to go about with, which probably explains things" (*Thirty-Nine Steps* 2). Hannay receives no pleasure from these homosocial acts. Because he longs for "something to do," he is aware that he must be "productive" and "act" in order to achieve society's expectations of him (3). This longing for action turns the text into a primer on how a hero

must think and act in the mode of Thomas Carlyle. After the death of the agent Scudder in Hannay's apartment, Hannay states that he "was pretty well bound to carry on his [Scudder's] work. You may think this ridiculous for a man in danger of his life, but that was the way I looked at it" (20). Society has conditioned him to view his role in this way by Carlyle and Arnold's writings. Hannay also proves that a common man can be a hero. He says, "I am an ordinary sort of fellow, not braver than other people, but I hate to see a good man downed" (20). Hannay recognizes his destiny and accepts it willingly. He adds, "It was going to be a giddy hunt, and it was queer how the prospect comforted me" (21). Hannay knows that he needs to act to be a viable, contributing member of society. The fact that he embarks on his quest is one part of his heroism; the fact that he *looks forward* to the quest is the other part of his adherence to the Carlylean ideal.

While *Thirty-Nine Steps* appears to fit enough critical criteria to become canonical, it does not fully succeed according to Matthew Arnold's notion of "disinterestedness." Arnold defines this as criticism—and literature—which refuses "to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas" ("The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" 150). This means that works which espouse a nationalistic point of view like that in *Thirty-Nine Steps*—dealing with the German Menace of the early 1900s—cannot fully be considered canonical because it is so ingrained and confined within its time, rather than transcending eras. Arnold's criteria relating to action is also relevant here. Arnold says "[t]he date of an action, then, signifies nothing: The action itself, its selection and construction, this is what is all-important" ("Preface to Poems"). Arnold seems to contradict himself here, as far as canonicity is concerned. He avers that the era a text is set in is immaterial to the ideas that the work attempts to convey, while at the same time a work needs to transcend all eras to be canonical. *Thirty-Nine Steps* fits some of the criteria for canonicity, but by being inextricably of its time because of its subject matter, it lacks the complete qualifications for inclusion in the canon.

Conclusion

The Picture of Dorian Gray and *Maurice* embrace homosocial spaces, while *The Thirty-Nine Steps* disparages them as impediments to true heroic action. While all three may possess literary merit, all three ultimately fail to meet the requirements for canonicity. But they fail in different ways. *Maurice*, with its depiction of homosexuality deriving out of the homosocial institution of the university, fails to live up to the ideas and ideals of its era that Matthew Arnold seeks in great works. *Dorian Gray* shows some of the dangers of over-reliance on homosocial institutions, with Dorian's selfish—and ultimately tragic—character shaped by Sir Henry and his set. But it also fails to make the canon because it lacks a clear moral message denouncing the inaction endemic to homosocial spaces. John Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps* comes closest to canonical status of the three, with its Carlylean protagonist choosing adventure and action over self-preservation and the moral emptiness of homosocial spaces. But it lacks Arnold's disinterestedness because of its blatant nationalistic viewpoint. These failings keep *Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Maurice* and *Thirty-Nine Steps* from achieving canonicity.

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