"NATURE WAS STRONG IN HIM": SPOILING THE EMPIRE BOY IN GEORGE MEREDITH'S *THE EGOIST*

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In the fourth act of Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* Algernon Moncrieff terminates his association with his alter ego Bunbury in order to reconstruct himself as a suitable husband for Jack/Ernest's ward, Miss Cecily Cardew:

> "Lady Bracknell: May I ask if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr Bunbury resides?
> Algernon: Oh! No! Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead.
> Lady Bracknell: Dead! When did Mr Bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden.
> Algernon (airily): Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean, poor Bunbury died this afternoon.
> Lady Bracknell: What did he die of?
> Algernon: Bunbury? Oh, he was quite exploded.
> Lady Bracknell: Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr Bunbury was interested in social legislation. (68-69)

This famous Wildean exchange offers a fresh vantage point from which to decode some of the tensions surrounding issues of masculinity, boyhood, heroism and national identity in George Meredith's novel *The Egoist*, my argument being that the character of Meredith's boy hero is crucial to the novel's deconstruction of adult masculine identity. More specifically I suggest that a form of Bunburying is practised in *The Egoist*. This is not the same kind of Bunburying for which the cucumber sandwiches and cigarette cases of *The Importance of Being Earnest* are such flourishing signifiers.[1] In fact the novel heavily critiques various forms of the nineteenth-century masculine enclave such as the monastery or the university. *The Egoist* invents a decoy, a figure that contains something of the idea of Bunbury as the representative of an ailing, even monstrous, masculinity.

If Oscar Wilde's Bunbury is "quite exploded" by the generic requirements of the comedy of manners, in Meredith's novel a rather more literal explosion takes place when the windows of Sir Willoughby Patterne's amateur laboratory are blown out by the chemical experiments of Crossjay Patterne, the boy in the text. Crossjay is the son of an impoverished but famous hero of the marines, a cousin to Willoughby. The boy is brought to Patterne Hall by Willoughby's secretary and male companion Vernon

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[1] As Christopher Craft and others argue Algernon's mysterious Mr Bunbury is a code or a secret password for the kind of adventures between men that could not be mentioned in Victorian drawing rooms (19-46).

Whitford, who offers to tutor the boy in preparation for his Royal Navy exams under Willoughby's auspices.[2] At first, however, Crossjay resists being tutored, escaping the schoolroom to play in the woods on the Patterne estate. Elizabeth Blackwell's observation that "temptations meet the lad at every step" in her *Counsel to Parents on the Moral Education of Their Children* (28) might have been written for Crossjay, for whom the "habits of birds, and the place for their eggs, and the management of rabbits, and the tickling of fish, and poaching joys with combative boys of the district and how to wheedle a cook for a luncheon for a whole day in the rain" (Meredith 30) are more interesting than the schoolroom.

Bearing in mind Lady Bracknell's remark about revolutionary outrage, the Bunbury in *The Egoist* might at first appear to be the twelve-year-old Crossjay who attempts to blast his way out of the confines of education. Crossjay's extra-curricular activities are, however, merely the markers of boyhood. They show that he is good raw material for the creation of a British naval hero. In fact Crossjay turns out to be only one form of decoy, an apparent expression of Willoughby's generosity and compassion for the son of his lower-class cousin. The "other" Bunbury—the real one, if you like—is the role Sir Willoughby himself performs as the epitome of the courtly English gentleman aspiring "after some form of melodious gentlemanliness" (Meredith 11) from a time "when an English cavalier was grace incarnate . . . beautifully mannered, every gesture dulcet" (11).

Willoughby's preference for an old-fashioned gentleman's country life conveys his belief that Britain is in decline, echoing the early-Victorian "condition of England" debate.[3] His antagonism to English urbanisation emerges in the novel as a contested and anachronistic idea in various ways, above all through the character of Crossjay Patterne who is portrayed as a new generation of the British adventurer. In contrast, as the novel unfolds, Willoughby's role as the English cavalier is revealed as a disguise for his rather more sinister incarnation as the domesticated Gothic patriarch who preys upon women and children. The novel employs various Gothic tropes including references to vampirism, seclusion and live burial. The allusion to Willoughby's laboratory also invokes the dark science of Mary Shelley's Dr Frankenstein. In fact we never find out Willoughby's scientific reason for building the laboratory, only that it is his consolation for being rejected at the altar by his first fiancée.

The theme of childhood education in *The Egoist* intersects with the novel's exploration of the naturalness of gender roles. Indeed one way to address this novel is to consider its conflicting tendencies towards and away from a feminist program of reform as the critic Carolyn Williams has done, or as one contemporary Victorian writer Adeline Sergeant did rather differently in her article "George Meredith's Views of Women" when she wrote of his depiction of the female condition that "he aims high, but not high enough" (210). While Sergeant gives thanks to Meredith "for his pictures

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[2] Margaret Harris refers to the historical formation of the Royal Marines and notes that its status is lower than that of the Navy (Meredith 553).

[3] Early in the novel Willoughby plans to enter parliament with the support of his cousin Vernon Whitford, perhaps suggesting that one course of his egoism is a desire to be identified with anti-industrial social reform, but this project is later abandoned (89).

of women nobly at odds with themselves and with the world," she also objects to his "failure to discern the everlasting differences between the natures of women and men" (212).

The idea of "nature" is certainly one with which Meredith himself is somewhat at odds, whether in his novels about the education of men and boys, or in *The Egoist*'s depiction of the protean New Woman, Clara Middleton. Dialogue about nature and artifice occurs at various points in *The Egoist*, frequently allied to discussions about the role of women. In a different sense the theme of nature is also important for the more sympathetic characters as a cipher for differentiating honesty and imagination from flattery and deception. The central character of this novel—the "egoist" himself Sir Willoughby Patterne—is defined in terms of a naturalised English tradition. It is the appearance of the "natural" boy Crossjay Patterne that sets the novel in motion and firmly calls into question the terms in which Sir Willoughby is seen as an authentic example of the English gentleman: "rich, handsome, courteous, generous, lord of the Hall, the feast and the dance" (10). Rather than addressing the main plot of the novel in which Sir Willoughby Patterne attempts to persuade, deceive, and finally force Clara Middleton into marrying him, it is by looking "across" the theme of gender—just as Crossjay literally crosses Willoughby's purpose—that we might begin to see how the novel draws on an array of familiar Victorian discourses as part of an argument or program of education about the construction of social identity.

Once Crossjay arrives at Patterne Hall under the wing of Vernon Whitford, Willoughby turns from his experiments in the amateur laboratory to "experimenting" with a future for the boy's masculine career as a pseudo-gentleman and hanger-on. He thus attempts to seduce the boy away from following in his father's footsteps to an intended naval career by allowing him to play in the laboratory. It is at this moment that Crossjay destroys the laboratory windows, and this becomes a metaphor for the way he also explodes the myth of Willoughby's generosity when he says to Clara Middleton "my father came here once, and Sir Willoughby wouldn't see him" (72). This remark of Crossjay's made with innocent puzzlement refers to a crucial incident at the start of the novel when his father Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne attempts to visit Willoughby and is turned away at the door. The lieutenant is introduced as a hero of Empire "of the unpretending cool sort which kindles British blood" (6). His famous act of bravery as a marine is "the storming of some eastern riverain stronghold, somewhere about the coast of China" (6). As a student Willoughby worships his older cousin but when he sees him from a distance in person, in appearance an unheroic "thick-set stumpy man" (8), he refuses to have the marine seen among his friends. The novel's own discourse of heroism is ambiguous. There is a class-identified tension between the elder Lieutenant Crossjay's status as a Marine and his son's ambition to become a Royal Naval officer. Moreover Willoughby's bragging of his association with the man is seen as "laughable":

> British sailor inebriate and the hauling off to captivity of the three braves of the black not less funny was the description of his namesake's deed of valour; with the rescued dragon on a yellow ground, and the tying of them together back to back by their pigtails and driving of them into our lines. . . . The humour of gentlemen at

> home is always highly excited by such cool feats. We are a small island but you see what we do. (7)

In contrast with Willoughby's self-inflating fantasies of importance by association, the lieutenant is seen as the honest Englishman who is willing to sacrifice personal wealth to be true to his country. His son's part in *The Egoist* is a relatively small one but young Crossjay Patterne always appears at significant moments as a testament to his father's manly values: loyalty, courage, good appetite and a keen disregard for scholarly pursuits in service of national ideals.[4]

Representations of the British Navy were publicly contested throughout the nineteenth century. In an island nation striving for geographical and economic expansion in Asia and Africa the navy was at the forefront in promoting British interests. Celebrated for its feats in both war and commerce earlier in the century, the navy later experienced a decline. As John Beeler observes in his study of Victorian naval policy, public attention in the press of the day characterised the navy as a "rotten" and inebriate bevy of no-hopers (46).[5] During the 1870s and 1880s the Royal British Navy was an extremely rigid institution with very few opportunities for the promotion of junior officers (Hill 273). This then was the great British institution to which Crossjay Patterne's ambition and education are directed and through which his tendency towards explosive rebellion is legitimated as evidence of his capacity for action and career adventurism.[6]

As I have suggested the event of the exploding laboratory windows is a key one in the novel signalling the role that Crossjay is to play in unwittingly subverting Willoughby's domestic plans. The laboratory serves here as reference point for several key forms of nineteenth-century ideology such as nature, education, science, and the convention of separate spheres. Meredith's representation of Victorian childhood intersects each of these discourses by dramatically placing at stake notions of moral vigour and national pride through the figure of the "natural boy." Ideas of British

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[4] Elsewhere the novel also actively employs the oriental trope of the Willow Pattern Plate—a further indication of its engagement with imperialist discourse and with the popular tropes of empire. One of the most successful marketing stories of the mid-nineteenth century, the Willow Pattern plate reflects the relationship between the rise of Victorian consumerism and British colonial acquisition—both material and cultural. Set in mythological China the story of the Willow Pattern plate offers a narrative device to which *The Egoist* repeatedly refers, balanced by reportage of the imperial adventures of the marines in China. Among the specific references in the novel to the Willow Pattern story are the name Willoughy Patterne, the scholarly secretary who falls in love with the Mandarin's daughter, the drinking session between the Mandarin and the wealthy suitor, the motif of the cherry tree in bloom and the fleeing lovers, Constantia Durham and Captain Oxford, as "a pair as happy as blackbirds in a cherry-tree, in a summer sunrise, with the owner of the garden asleep" (460). For further discussion of this theme in the novel see Beer (131) and Mayo (71-78).

[5] The image of the sailor was revived at the end of the century as a trope of popular commodity culture when it was used to sell soap and tobacco (Hill 272).

[6] As Martin Green observes, in generating rebellion the child "performs a series of exploits which make him/her a hero, eminent in virtues such as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership and persistence" (23).

national identity are played out in *The Egoist* through competing representations of the masculine body in childhood.

Thomas Carlyle and Charles Kingsley both contributed to Victorian constructions of physical and spiritual manliness. As Gail Ching-Liang Low observes, for these and other writers of the time the "principle of the healthy body was a national and racial imperative" (19). If the rhetoric of social degeneration was allied with the rise of theories of evolution, then while resistance to British colonialism aroused fears of a decline in British imperial interests these anxieties also enhanced existing tropes of the soldier hero.[7] The concept of British boyhood was thus a key discursive field for a gendered and embodied discourse of British patriotism expressed in the fiction of writers such as Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard and R.M. Ballantyne as the adventure hero in embryo.

There are two types of boyhood in *The Egoist*. The first is exemplified by Sir Willoughby Patterne's portrait at Patterne Hall, "the little prince" in stockings and breeches: the proto-type of the cultivated cavalier "in a hat, leaning on his pony, with crossed legs and long flaxen hair" (19). The portrait is held up by the powerful society ladies of the county as an icon of English youth, but this is done in a way that accrues some of the ironical tone of one of Oscar Wilde's theatrical dowagers. For example, the tone of Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's remark that Willoughby "has a leg" (11) hints at her sceptic's sense of his vanity as well as expressing a class-bound admiration. The calf or "leg" exposed below Willoughby's painted costume breeches attracts intense attention in the text as a figure of Willoughby's identity: "Mrs Mountstuart signified that the leg was to be seen because it was a burning leg. There it is, and it will shine through. He has the leg of Rochester, Buckingham, Dorset . . . Such a leg . . . will walk straight into the hearts of women . . . Self-satisfied it must be. Humbleness does not win multitudes" (11-12).

The leg is a signifier of an older England, but it is also a motif of artifice, a painted "leg" out of its own time.[8] The severing of the leg from the body in Mrs Mountstuart's musings alerts us to Willoughby's later abandonment of integrity. The leg becomes a wandering signifier, the phallic "I" of Willoughby's "egoism" that will be inevitably exposed. Given the reference to the leg as a key to the hearts (and presumably the bodies) of women, it is worth remembering that this is a portrait of a "handsome, fair boy" (19).[9] Later representations in the novel of Willoughby's adult physical presence convey him as heavily masculine, predatory, even creepy, especially in the scenes where he fondles Clara Middleton's hand (for example 61). It is also important to note that in a novel deliberately engaging with Victorian ideas about nature and science the leg is also an indicator of genetic inheritance, of fitness to rule. As the possessor of the signifying

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[7] As exemplified in the Chinese rebellions of the late 1850s in Canton.

[8] This image is clearly suggestive of Thomas Gainsborough's famous *Blue Boy* portrait, but the romance of the English cavalier as a trope of effete masculinity would also be parodied in *Punch* only a few years later through exaggerated references to Oscar Wilde's youthful costume-adventures when he toured America in velveteen breeches.

[9] Willoughby's portrait might also be compared with Holman Hunt's *Bubbles* which was to become an important signifier of the link between Victorian youth, masculinity and commodity culture (see Sussmann 156-57).

patriarchal "leg" or "branch" of the Patterne family Willoughby shows proof that he is "the heir of successful competitors" (38).

Willoughby's effete boyhood portrait contrasts strongly with the earthy figure of his young cousin Crossjay Patterne, a "boy of twelve with the sprights of twelve boys in him" (29), whose voracious appetite and restlessness signal his association with the natural world. He is actually described in simian terms as "half monkey" (125). But Crossjay turns out not to be "so prehensile as he should be" (125). Although "nature was very strong in him" (19), this is a nature with a strong national character: one that, as the novel suggests, can be trained. His opposition to "the acquisition of knowledge through the medium of books," his indolence, muddy pranks and desire to "revel in a country life" (29), bring to mind Thomas Arnold's description of the qualities of boyhood as "teachableness. ignorance, selfishness, and living only for the present" (Sermon 2 "Christian Life"; qtd Kincaid 71).

It is the question of a boy's "teachableness" that is crucial here, and it is this question that underpins the story of Crossjay Patterne in Meredith's novel just as its theme of gender and education underpins its dialogue about the social roles of men and women. Arnold offers a guide to the moral education favoured by Crossjay's guardian angels Clara Middleton and Vernon Whitford, in which "a little bracing roughness" (Meredith 125) is better than "spoiling" the child with false aspirations to an idle upper class life. In the economy of this novel education is for a purpose. Only Crossjay's "passion for our naval service" is "a means of screwing his attention to lessons" (29).

In his essay on Arnold in *Eminent Victorians* Lytton Strachey wrote with reference to Eton that the English public school "was a system of anarchy tempered by despotism. Hundreds of boys, herded together in miscellaneous boarding houses . . . a life of freedom and terror, of prosody and rebellion, of interminable floggings and appalling practical jokes" (194). It was Arnold of course who emerged as the angel of transformation, instituting a new regime at Rugby which tended to reflect the emergence of middle-class values as the new mainstream in British society. As Strachey observes, "the growing utilitarianism of the age viewed with impatience a course of instruction which excluded every branch of knowledge except classical philology" (295).[10] The education of the British boy and the promotion of values such as duty, honesty, discipline, courage and health were also linked to the development of patriotism.[11]

Thus the training offered by the public schools can be seen as a systematic preparation for the boys and the men who would set out on the path of colonial adventure. But Crossjay's education is a private one, and this fact helps to locate the conflict in *The Egoist* between private life and public service. On the one hand Willoughy attempts to make a gentleman of the boy by giving him half-crowns and sovereigns (72), on the other Vernon Whitford tries to prepare him to pass the naval

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[10] Despite the controversy and modernist scepticism associated with Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* its publication was a curiously Victorian phenomenon, emerging with Lesley Stephen's more canonical *Dictionary of National Biography* at the end of an era in which the biography was clearly established as a celebrated literary genre by writers as diverse as J.A. Froude and Harriet Martineau. For a discussion of the historical development in biography as a literary genre see Altick.

[11] J.A. Mangan has explored this concept extensively, for example the emergence and consolidation of an educational ideology in *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*.

exams. It is Vernon's approach that is given the greatest moral value. Clara Middleton expresses this most clearly when she says to Crossjay "Somebody spoils you" (71) and then advises "though Mr Whitford does not give you money, he gives you his time, he tries to get you into the navy" (72). Willoughby thus softens the boy up while Vernon puts him to work.[12]

This might at first appear as a gendered division. As J.A. Mangan and James Walvin observe, the late-Victorian concept of "manliness" "stood for neo-Spartan virility as exemplified by stoicism, hardiness and endurance" (*Manliness* 1). Vernon's role as the active man of letters is interesting to note here as a counter-identity to Willoughby's lordly narrow-mindedness and to Crossjay's more conventional worship of male heroism. Moreover Clara Middleton shows that girls can be heroes too, first when she reminds Crossjay of women soldiers and sailors in history, citing Mary Ambree, Joan of Arc and Boadicea (70). She later performs an act of social heroism herself when she stands up to Willoughby in her father's presence, finally and publicly forcing him to release her from their betrothal.

Crossjay plays a crucial role just prior to this point in the novel when he accidentally overhears Willoughby proposing in secret to another woman even though he has actually refused to allow Clara to break things off between them. Willoughby's strategic cover as the "Bunbury" of the tale, who pretends to be alive with romance when he has already abandoned his original object of desire, is thus blown apart by Crossjay on several levels. The boy maintains his honour by refusing to spill the beans about Willoughby while at the same time revealing the truth through his transparently honest embarrassment. He thereby proves himself in physical and moral terms as fit for England's Royal British Navy. In various ways throughout the novel Meredith places the idea of England in contest, and the terms in which he defines "heroism" are complex and at times ambiguous. Crossjay nevertheless embodies the active values of British imperial adventure and self-sacrifice. In one of the dialogues between Clara and Crossjay the boy observes with his characteristic naiveté that "naval officers are not like Sir Willoughby." "No they are not," Clara replies, "they give their lives to their country" (117). Willoughby's attempt to "spoil" Crossjay for this purpose by encouraging him to behave like a leisured English gentleman is unsuccessful in the face of Vernon's "proper" proper guidance. Crossjay overcomes temptation, sticking to his naval ambitions and to his ideal of British valour. The boy thus offers a field of value, a natural English self to be given up to the national enterprise. The novel also suggests, however, that valour is not merely something that men do in the field of action. The counter-themes of masculine egoism and self-sacrifice are also balanced in this novel by the stories about the education of girls and women who, like the boys, must be trained if they are not to spoil on the altar of domestic abnegation.

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[12] Meredith counterbalances his exploration of the relationship between gender and nature through the moral and social challenges posed to the character of Clara Middleton by having Willoughby abandon his public duty as a parliamentarian. This foregrounds the theme of masculinity in relation to Willoughby as a tension between his effeminate predisposition for the domestic life and his dominating presence as the egotistical lord of the manor.

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