

## George Eliot's enthusiastic bachelors: topical fictional accounts of nineteenth-century homoerotic Christian masculinities and the manhood question

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### Abstract

The early modern British bachelor was loosely and negatively defined, and his nineteenth-century descendant's perceived selfishness and luxury evidently concerned his society and its authors because his position *vis-à-vis* the manhood question was unclear. The manhood question considers how a boy or a man might grow into and sustain a meaningful, productive, and commendable type of manhood. The nineteenth-century British bachelor's transitional or peripheral relationship with heteronormative manhood; which valued marriage, children, and work; was topical because of his ambiguous social value and bodily potential; his responsibilities and his desire were not necessarily subject to those prescriptions that constrained married men. Both Platonic and Christian forms of enthusiasm permitted homoerotic same-sex friendships; consequently, an enthusiastic bachelorhood intensified societal ambivalence about bachelors. Victorian society lamented the unconventional homoerotic potential of a bachelor manhood enabled by an enthusiastic Christian vocation.

Because they most notably challenge the integrity of her moral realism, the most interesting of George Eliot's Christian bachelors exemplify an enthusiasm-enabled, potentially transgressive manhood. Seth Bede and Dino de Bardi respectively exemplify potentially homoerotic evangelical and Catholic bachelorhood. Eliot reconciles them to the heteronormative world of her fiction first, by acknowledging in code their potentially homoerotic bachelorhood (without permitting them to influence the values of this fictional world) and second, by reproducing in her fiction those heteronormative conventional protocols of bachelor domestication and homoerotic containment. Silas Marner and Savonarola positively model these protocols, but I suggest that Eliot's coding possibly enabled rather than contained enthusiastic homoerotic aestheticism.

### Introduction

British bachelors have traditionally represented an oddly compelling nonconformity. Nineteenth-century English writers continued an ambivalent yet consistent interest in these “unmarried men of marriageable age” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) evident in Chaucer, who observed “That bacheloris have often peyne and wo” in contrast to “thilke blissful lyf/That is betwixe an housband and his wyf” (Chaucer 1978, 115). In the early modern period bachelors were criticized for their selfishness and luxury. Excusing only the single man dedicated in Christian vocation to “the glory of GOD and the Good of his soul,” Mary Astell, for example, chided the bachelor “who lives single that he may indulge licentiousness and give up himself to the conduct of wild and ungovernable desires,” noting that he “can never justifie his own Conduct, nor clear it from the imputation of Wickedness and Folly” (Astell 1986, 94). Samuel Johnson remarked on “the unsettled, thoughtless condition of the bachelor” (Johnson 1992, 180), and an anonymous eighteenth-century pamphleteer proposed corrective legislative and social intervention. One woman participant in this booklet's dialogue insisted that she “would have it a general compulsive Act” that “Every Bachelor, at the Age of twenty-four Years, should pay” a punitive “Tax to the Queen” (Kimmel 1988, 421), the other that “a Bachelor is a useless Thing in the State,” who, “according to the laws of Nature and Reason...is a Minor, and ought to be under the Government of the Parish in which he lives”(Kimmel 1988, 422).<sup>1</sup> This pamphlet attributes

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<sup>1</sup> Kimmel (1988, v-vi) notes that this petition for the taxation of bachelors had an intriguing early modern historical antecedent: “a ‘male shortage’—there were thirteen women for every ten men in London in 1694—prompted an amusing mock petition to Parliament for an annual tax on all men who remained single after twenty-one. This petition, published in 1693, ‘was subscribed by ten thousand Green-Sickness Maidens’ and printed for their ‘Fore Maid’ one ‘Mary Wantman.’”

foppish, contemporary bachelorhood to the fact that “The Men, they, are grown full as effeminate as the women” (419). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publishers exploited popular indignation concerning bachelors’ refusal to marry by printing a series of broadsides expressing misogynist and misandrist interpretations of this refusal.<sup>2</sup> People might have imagined different reasons why he remained single, but many agreed that for the bachelor to be reintegrated into normal society he needed to be disciplined and domesticated. The early modern bachelor, then, was loosely and negatively defined; he represented various masculinities; his nineteenth-century descendant’s potential selfishness, luxury (topically understood as effeminacy or licentiousness), and civic uselessness evidently concerned his society and its authors because his position *vis-à-vis* the manhood question was unclear.<sup>3</sup> The ambiguous social value and unconventional bodily potential of a bachelor manhood enabled by an enthusiastic Christian vocation caused particular societal concern, and because their irregularity was so compelling, two of George Eliot’s enthusiastic Christian bachelor characters challenge the integrity of her fiction’s moral realism.<sup>4</sup> Seth Bede and Dino de’ Bardi exemplify topical bachelor masculinities that potentially undermine heteronormative manhood.

### **The manhood question**

Since its first sex-specific use in the fourteenth century, the word *manhood* has defined men’s identities and conduct, articulating the changeable nature of men’s social value (by evaluating their duty to society and their courage) and bodily potential (by measuring their sexual potency).<sup>5</sup> Manhood has been *the* traditional measure of a man’s socially prescribed and contingent identity; manhood is conditional because a failure to attain and sustain one’s manhood might result in one being unmanned, a condition associated with weakness, cowardice, and effeminacy.<sup>6</sup> The manhood question, which takes into account this prescription and contingency, considers how a boy or a man might grow into and sustain a meaningful, productive, and commendable type of manhood. Heteronormative manhood added having a family life with children to these indicators of successful manhood. The nineteenth-century British bachelor’s limited scope for attaining this heteronormative manhood was topical because

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<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *misandry* as “The hatred of males; hatred of men as a sex.” Clark (1995, 69-71) describes these publishers’ participation in the marriage debate.

<sup>3</sup> The plural form, masculinities, customarily acknowledges men’s multiple identities, yet it also invites a socio-political analysis of their conception and reception. Herbert Sussman (1995, 8), for example, distinguishes “the social construction of what at any historical moment marked as ‘masculine’” inherent in masculinities from “the biological determinants” emphasized by Men’s Studies”; R. W. Connell (1995, 76,81) cautions that “[r]ecognizing multiple masculinities ... risks taking them for alternative lifestyles, as matter of consumer choice”; instead he suggests that “A relational approach makes it easier to recognize the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed, the bitterness as well as the pleasure in gendered experience,” that “two types of relationship—hegemony, domination/subordination and complicity on the one hand, marginalization/authorization on the other—provide a framework in which we can analyze specific masculinities.”

<sup>4</sup> Several notable scholars have insightfully studied Eliot’s moral realism. Holloway (1965, 1) argues that Eliot and the other sages in his study “sought (among other things) to express notions about the world, man’s situation in it, and how he should live.” Knoepfelmacher (1968, 1) argues that Eliot sought to have her fiction “accommodate both “the actual and the ideal laws she wanted to portray,” a quest in which she “arranged reality to make it substantiate her moral beliefs. See also Levine (2001).

<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first male-specific use of *manhood* in 1340, notes men’s societal duty and courage (in 3. and 5.) and describes a man’s sexual potency (in 4.d.). See Stearns, 1990, chapter two, for a concise survey of Western manhood.

<sup>6</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3, defines *unman* as “to deprive of manly courage or fortitude; to make weak or effeminate.”

of his ambiguous social value and bodily potential. A bachelors' place in society had always been either transitional (preparing for marriage and establishment), or peripheral (secluded from, either by circumstance or choice, or appended to a traditional family). Transitional bachelors often delayed marrying until their finances could support this domesticity, customarily then attaining their heteronormative manhood by setting up their own workshops or seeking their fortune in the colonies.<sup>7</sup> (While many working-class male groups professed to be anti-marriage, some served as a support network for men until they eventually married.<sup>8</sup>) Seeking an alternative to marriage, middle- and upper-class men sometimes chose to remain bachelors, living in what John Tosh calls supportive "homosocial environments" (2005, 114) on the periphery of British family life or abroad, and in the second half of the nineteenth century this choice increasingly concerned the Victorian public.<sup>9</sup>

### **The bachelor alternative**

The bachelor's role as a "threshold figure" (Snyder, 1999, 7); located on the frontier of a successful, reproductive domestic world and its marginalized alternative; allowed him unique access to both.<sup>10</sup> His very presence as a visitor to, or a cohabitant within, the extended heterosexual family personified an alternative masculinity and manhood, and his bodily potential (how he chose to express his manhood physically) implied different ways to work, to live, and to love. British society valued bachelor workers. Exemplary and respectable all-male work environments supported by relevant social organizations of brotherhood had been available to men of different classes in situations as different as professional and artisanal guilds, educational institutions, the church, and the Foreign Service.<sup>11</sup> These working arrangements usually enabled forms of manhood complementary to the world of normative heterosexual manhood or alternatives discretely imbedded within it; while embodying different masculinities the artisan, the clerk, the schoolmaster, and the cleric all turned out to work for wage, Crown, and country. British society was, however, ambivalent about bachelor domesticity. A bachelor's living and loving occurred in an important environmental nexus for cathecting his social value and his bodily potential, and its very physical existence potentially subverted heteronormative manhood. Snyder notes his "disorderly potential" for heterosexual domesticity and argues that "the discourse of bachelor domesticity provided opportunities for bachelors to go out of bounds" (1999, 33). The bachelor was often a familiar part of the extended heteronormative family but usually neither responsible for its maintenance nor subject to all of its rules. His ethos lay elsewhere. In addition, male-only accommodation was available for single men in working-class lodging houses and middle- and upper-class clubs, chambers, or flats, living environments whose

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<sup>7</sup> Clark (1995, 58 and 188), discusses the plight of working-class men forced to delay marriage because of economic constraints. See John Tosh (2005, 206-207) on working-class men and migration.

<sup>8</sup> Clark (1995, 69, 34) contrasts the anti-marriage position of bachelor journeyman culture with the "transitional support system" evident in "some textile workers' clubs," concluding that "the latter "seem to have valued marriage more."

<sup>9</sup> Tosh (1991) and Cominos (1963) discuss these men's decisions to remain bachelors and the consequent societal concern.

<sup>10</sup> Snyder (1999, 7) defines a "threshold figure" as one "who marked the permeable boundaries that separate domesticity, normative manhood, and high-cultural status, from what was defined as extrinsic to these realms."

<sup>11</sup> Clark (1995, 33-34, 69, 122-142) examines working-class all-male environments; Tosh (2005, 114,206-207) and (2001, 66-68) discusses middle- and upper-class all-male work environments. Showalter (1990, 24-26) discusses nineteenth-century men's socially acceptable preference for the "masculine freedom" provided by travel and exploration.

popularity increased in the nineteenth-century.<sup>12</sup> Bachelors could often seclude themselves from heteronormative society at will, living and loving instead in their own private, unregulated realm. This transgressive potential situated them in a topical political and moral public discourse about effeminacy, selfishness, masturbation, and same-sex eroticism.

Newly established Anglo- and Roman-Catholic male communities made Victorians anxious about Catholicism's potential for alternate, homosocial masculinity. Several scholars have studied how Catholicism enabled men to express same-sex desire. Hilliard (1981-1982), for example, argues that the Oxford Movement enabled intense male friendships and exclusively male cloisters, which could have occasioned proto-homosexual relationships. Whether these relationships occurred or not, many Victorians imagined them possible, and while these religious communities afforded men a morally sanctioned alternative to heteronormative manhood (an allowance evident in Mary Astell's commentary), they also afforded them a safe place to explore male-male desire. Many Victorians thought these institutions encouraged effeminacy, and concerns about effeminacy underpin nineteenth-century perceptions of evangelical and Catholic enthusiasm, bachelorhood, and men's communities because of their respective potential for consummated male-male desire.<sup>13</sup> This impression of the potentially homoerotic capability of monastic communities pervaded nineteenth-century British society and literature.<sup>14</sup>

### **Bachelors and effeminacy**

Since the eighteenth-century, when their sexuality was even deemed "politically suspect" because of the perceived influence of "French Vice," bachelors were often considered effeminate and, consequently, of questionable social value (Clark 1995, 153). Effeminacy, a condition of undisciplined luxury and possible unconventional sexuality, had alarmed late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British society as evidence of a corrupt body politic, adversely impacting national security.<sup>15</sup> A supposedly effeminate bachelors' lack of discipline was understood as civic and economic selfishness—echoing those concerns of our above-mentioned eighteenth-century pamphleteer—and as embodying a morally-suspect potential for recreational sex, which topically also suggested male-male sex.<sup>16</sup> Public hostility to unconventional sexuality is evident in published reactions to early nineteenth-century attempts at population control; members of the popular press expressed indignation at these attempts' perceived authorization for varied non-procreative sex. In 1823 the radical newspaper, the *Black Dwarf*, conjectured that

<sup>12</sup> Clark (1995, 144-145) examines working-class bachelor lodgings; Snyder (1999, 34-47) describes the increasingly popularity of various male-exclusive living arrangements in the nineteenth century. Showalter (1990, 26) foregrounds the economic benefits single men enjoyed in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>13</sup> In his *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman offered an *apologia* for effeminacy by defining a gentleman as "a friend of religious toleration, and that, not only because his philosophy has taught him to look on all forms of faith with an impartial eye, but also from the gentleness and effeminacy of feeling, which is the attendant on civilization" (1976, 180).

Culler (1956, ix) observes, for example, that the Kingsley-Newman antagonism seems to have been based on the former being repulsed by the latter's effeminacy--one he thought typical of Roman Catholics and Tractarians. Culler argues that for many Victorians, Catholicism meant celibacy, effeminacy, and unnatural sex acts.

<sup>14</sup> Sussman (1995, 182-185, 192-193) discusses the relationship between homoeroticism, monasticism, and the homoerotic poetic. See also Roden (2002), chapters one and four.

<sup>15</sup> Williams (1993) discusses the corrupting impact of effeminacy and luxury on the body politic in eighteenth-century Britain in chapter one. On concerns about men's ability to bear arms see Tosh (2005) 65-66. Colley (1992) discusses British recruitment of men for war in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in chapter seven and the decline of British military preparedness after the Napoleonic wars in chapter eight." G. J. Barker-Benfield (1992, 104-153) undertakes a thorough cultural study of eighteenth-century discussions of effeminacy.

<sup>16</sup> Tosh (2005, 42-43) understands this association in terms of patriarchal domination of subordinate, alternative masculinities.

advocates of birth control “are preparing the way for further experiments which may end in the grossest abominations, and extend the infamous practices which have so shamefully disgraced so many *ornaments* of the *church* and pillars of the *state*,” alluding to the same-sex Bishop of Clogher scandal, which erupted when this prominent anti-vice advocate was caught having sex with a guardsman (Clark 1995, 184). An 1825 edition of the *Trades’ Newspaper* similarly connected male-male sex and attempts at population control (Clark 1995, 185), and an 1826 article in the *Bull Dog* accused the prominent birth-control advocate, Francis Place, of converting young men to “catamites” (Clark 1995, 185). A man’s bodily potential was a serious political topic, and by the nineteenth century bachelor selfishness was also commonly thought to express itself bodily in masturbation; this practice was considered civically and medically unsound and believed to cause spermatorrhea, also known as bachelor’s disease.<sup>17</sup> First diagnosed in 1836, this condition upset the spermatic economy, Ben Barker-Benfield’s term for the economic basis for nineteenth-century considerations of appropriate sexual regulation and expression. Men’s sexual release in married heterosexual sexual activity was, of course, healthy; however, most Victorians tacitly accepted that celibacy was not the automatic alternative.<sup>18</sup> In fact, during the nineteenth-century, both celibacy and non-procreative sex, which included “masturbation, bestiality, and pederasty” (Snyder, 1999, 33) were increasingly associated with homosexuality which became, according to Craft, “the perversion of the future” (1994, 5). Because they attained a nonheteronormative type of manhood, which suggested their ambiguous social place and bodily potential, nineteenth-century British bachelors seemed susceptible to effeminacy and prone to perversion.

### **Bachelordom and enthusiasm**

Nineteenth-century bachelors’ social value and bodily potential were increasingly scrutinized and condemned; however, enthusiasm provided a useful vehicle for a potentially transgressive bachelorhood: Christian enthusiasm promised moral sanction and, like Platonic enthusiasm, respectable intellectual cover for an embodied homoerotic bachelor manhood. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the Victorians understood *enthusiasm* as a condition of “[r]apturous intensity of feeling in favor of a person, principle,” or a “cause,” and its obvious homoerotic potential derived from both its Platonic and Christian senses. Dowling has argued how central homoeroticism is to Plato’s understanding of enthusiasm: “In the Platonic context of the *Phaedrus* it is specifically possession by the god of love, the paiderastic Eros—‘the best of all forms of divine possession,’ as Socrates says there, ‘both in itself and in its sources, both for him that has it and for him that shares therein—and when he that loves beauty is touched by such

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<sup>17</sup> Snyder (1999, 32) succinctly describes these processes: “Particularly in the first half of the century, bachelors were thought to be especially susceptible to masturbation. The nonproductive, pleasure-driven, and self-oriented qualities of masturbation were thought to constitute a serious danger, a material and moral drain on the finite, bodily ‘spermatic economy’ as well as a drain on the domestic economies of the nation, race, and class.” She quotes Ben Barker-Benfield’s phrase which suggests that the nineteenth-century assumption that “the underlying model for the operation of the whole man, psychological and physiological, was economic” (1972, 338).

<sup>18</sup> See Snyder (1999, 33) and Showalter (1990, 24-25).

madness [*mania*] he is called a lover” (1994, 96).<sup>19</sup> Possession by the male god is the acme of enthusiasm, and its centrality was crucial in permitting homoeroticism in a Victorian aestheticism whose excesses controversially countered the ethos of productive, heteronormative manhood.<sup>20</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the “extravagance” and “[i]ll-regulated or misdirected religious emotion” associated with Christian enthusiasm in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries; this definition probably references contemporary evangelical or catholic displays of excessive emotion, often between or among persons of the same sex, which, in turn, allude to disorder and effeminacy.<sup>21</sup> Both Baptist and Methodists congregations had on occasion openly supported men prosecuted for sex with men and were therefore perceived as tolerant of homoerotic expression.<sup>22</sup> Catholicism paradoxically represented celibacy and an expression of same-sex desire. Roden notes, “The Oxford Movement and Catholicism in England [...] afforded through indirection other pleasures: the expression of same-sex desire through religious friendship and devotional practices” (33).<sup>23</sup> Although nominally chaste, Catholic expressions of same-sex desire occurred in an embodied homoerotic culture. Catholicism, as Sedgwick (1990, 140) has observed, “is famous for giving countless gay and proto-gay children the shock of the possibility of adults who don’t marry, of men in dresses, of passionate theatre, of introspective investment....And presiding over all are the images of Jesus....images of the unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored.” Therefore, although Catholic enthusiasm professed chastity, its iconography tacitly suggested its transgressive homoerotic potential. Both protestant and Catholic enthusiasm, then, permitted homoeroticism in Victorian religion and along with Platonic enthusiasm provided a morally and intellectually valid alternative basis for bachelor masculinities and an enthusiastic Christian manhood on the threshold of normative, heterosexual manhood.

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<sup>19</sup> Although he does not specifically discuss *Phaedrus* 249d-e, Dover (1989, 162) notes that “Throughout ... *Phaedrus* it is taken for granted that eros ... is homosexual” See his careful discussion of Plato’s philosophy and its relationship with homosexuality in 153-168.

<sup>20</sup> Dowling (1994, 67-103) examines this permission in the context of Oxford academic debates. Dellamora (1990, 24, 49, 114, 157, 180) does so in the broader context of Victorian aestheticism.

<sup>21</sup> G. J. Barker-Benfield (1992, 77) describes an early eighteenth-century satirical print, titled “Enthusiasm Displayed: or, The Moor-Fields Congregation” which depicts immodestly dressed the Methodist preacher, George Whitefield surrounded by women, “the most prominent of whom is young and scantily clad, and she is handing over a purseful of cash.” He adds, “It is not surprising, therefore, that Wesley asserted the manliness of his converts [...] Like other proponents of sensibility in men, Wesley made it clear that to bring men tearfully to Christ and to reform them was not to make them identifiable with women.”

<sup>22</sup> See Clark (1995, 115-117) and Abelove (1990, 63, 66-67).

<sup>23</sup> Although overtly non-sexual, Catholic male communities were viewed with suspicion because of their perceived covert subversive erotic intent. Roden, however, usefully asserts that, “An analysis of men’s desire at this time period need not be confessional or secretive. Such a narrative is not nineteenth-century anti-Catholic propaganda revealing the dirty secrets of Rome. Rather it is a coming-out of the homoaffective spaces such men inhabited in their spiritual, communal lives: adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, modeling their lives on saints whose *vitae* resonated with their own longings, and—perhaps most importantly—cultivation of friendships with like-minded men that enabled safe exploration of same-sex desire. In the end, these led to a latter decade’s self-awareness and definition of homosexual identity” (33-34). Analyzing Victorian men’s desire merely for instances of its “confessional and secretive” circumstances tacitly undermines its positive contribution to realizing a dignified homosexual identity; their passionate introspection taught them that men have intense emotional needs whose form and expression might be cultivated without shame.

### Enthusiastic Christian bachelors in George Eliot's fiction

From an amorphous and *louche* set of qualities, nineteenth-century writers of realist fiction had to create recognizable bachelor characters that integrated credibly into their respective fictional worlds.<sup>24</sup> George Eliot wrote frequently and attentively about bachelors; her fictional prose *opus* is neatly bookended with studies of bachelor philosophy in her “Poetry and Prose from the Notebook of an Eccentric” (1846) and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879). Those culturally pervasive and controversial nineteenth-century bachelor stereotypes already discussed, however, complicated her attempts at writing convincingly about bachelor manhood. Authorized by her standing as both a sage and a compelling realist novelist and consistent with her intent that they represent what she considered both the ideal and the real, Eliot's novels generally investigate the condition of typical men embodying topical masculinities and consciously striving to attain and sustain their productive heteronormative manhood. Eliot obviously wanted to convince the reader that what happens to these men is plausible and justifiable, and two enthusiastic Christian bachelor characters most effectively challenge Eliot's attempts at managing convincing characters whose respective fates appear to unfold under reasonable circumstances: evangelical Seth Bede Roman-Catholics, Dino de' Bardi represent topical masculinities whose profound enthusiasm inflects on their manhood.<sup>25</sup> Seth's and Dino's ambiguous social value and bodily potential challenge Eliot's orderly moral realism; they exemplify an enthusiasm-enabled, potentially transgressive manhood; their introspective selfishness and non-reproductive sexuality allusively suggest unmanly passivity, auto-, and same sex eroticism. Although it is expedient for the plot that they be marginalized, the reader might still wonder why young Seth too easily chooses peripheral bachelorhood and Dino too conveniently dies of a mysterious illness. One reasonable explanation might be that Eliot would have the reader understand the questionable social value and bodily potential these enthusiastic bachelor characters represent; then he or she would better accept what happens to them. Eliot uses two topical management strategies to achieve her goal: first, a coded acknowledgment of a potentially homoerotic bachelorhood and second, a fictional reproduction of heteronormative conventional protocols of bachelor domestication and homoerotic containment.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> My examination of Eliot's management of her enthusiastic bachelors extends thoughtful studies by Snyder (1999) and Sedgwick (1990) who have investigated strategies Victorian authors used to acknowledge but also to contain alternate, and in the work of the latter author, homoerotic masculinities. Snyder (1999, 33) has examined strategies employed by such authors to manage bachelors' “disorderly potential,” and Sedgwick (1990, 200-211) has astutely analyzed how homosexual possibility was coded and contained or neutralized in Victorian fiction.

<sup>25</sup> Although set in the Renaissance, *Romola* engages in a topical nineteenth-century debate about the role of religion in society. Joan Bennet (1948, 148) observes that, “When George Eliot chose the place and time for the setting of her 'historical romance', she was doubtless attracted by the apparent similarities between the Florence of Savonarola and the England of Cardinal Newman. There was a similar cleavage of thought between the Renaissance humanists and the religious reformers as there was in the nineteenth century between the rationalists and the religious revivalists (whether High-Anglican or Evangelical).” Eliot's Victorian reader would have recognized in Florentine Christian enthusiasm traits of nineteenth century Christian enthusiasm. Felicia Bonaparte (1979, 179) similarly suggests that, “Philosophically confused, morally uncertain, and culturally uprooted, [Florence] was a prototype of the upheaval of nineteenth-century England...In an age in which intellectual and moral uncertainty threatened society with anarchy, and in which Renaissance humanism had at last triumphed in a secularism that permitted neither wonder nor awe, Roman Catholicism, like the Middle Ages that embodied it and that became for men like Carlyle and Ruskin the Eden fortified by modern man, seemed indeed the last sanctuary of intellectual, moral, and spiritual order”

<sup>26</sup> I argue that these strategies are not conscious attempts at thwarting homoeroticism; however, they unquestioningly replicate thinking that normalizes and naturalizes heterosexuality when faced with bachelors' “conceptual incoherence” (Snyder 1999, 19).

Although Eliot offered no detailed commentary on Platonic enthusiasm, her ambivalence about Christian enthusiasm is voiced by the narrators of both *Adam Bede* and *Romola*.<sup>27</sup> The latitudinarian divine, Adolphus Irwine, in *Adam Bede* is praised for having “no enthusiasm, no self-scourging sense of duty,” and no “very-lofty aims, no theological enthusiasm” (1985, 111, 113); Romola’s experience of Savonarolan Christian enthusiasm and its limitations is described sympathetically but skeptically as the stuff of “vain dreams and willful eye-shutting” and as offering “the highest prize the soul can win” which “we almost believe in our power to attain” (526, 541). The author realistically accepts enthusiasm’s close relationship with desire (in *Adam Bede* we learn “our love is inwrought in our enthusiasm as electricity is inwrought in the air, exalting in its power by a subtle presence”) and applauds the role Savonarola’s Christian enthusiasm plays in “the subjugation of sensual desire” (401, 502). Thus the world view of both of these novels regards Christian enthusiasm as potentially misleading (because of its self-destructive, self-deluding tendencies—an observation made in *Silas Marner* as well) but possibly useful in containing or controlling erotic bodily potential.

To present Seth and Dino convincingly Eliot had, therefore, to make coherent those vague associations that comprised enthusiastic bachelor identity; moreover, she had to square a realistic depiction of them with a credible depiction of their respective fates. She managed this reconciliation by relying on common assumptions about heteronormative manhood shared with her reader concerning these bachelors’ apposite social position and acceptable uses of their bodily potential.<sup>28</sup> Eliot allusively codes these enthusiastic male characters as embodying homoerotic desire, reasonably evident in their embodied presence as threshold figures of their heteronormative families, and then denies them fulfillment of this desire by subjecting them—or subjugating them—to the apparently real circumstances of their respective fictional worlds. The world of the nineteenth-century realist novel resembles the heteronormative world of its author and audience; consequently, reconciling these bachelors to this world and its values involves Seth, rather like Silas after him, undergoing a socially acceptable neutering process of “sexual anesthesia” and bachelor “domestication” and Dino dying passively (and perhaps deservedly) to diffuse the “homosexual panic” he occasions—although Eliot, often relying on unexamined or naturalized assumptions about enthusiasm and male sexuality she shared with her reader, would obviously neither have recognized those exact terms nor have consciously managed their effect in the ways I shall describe (Sedgwick, 1990, 188, 199, 19-21).<sup>29</sup>

### **George Eliot’s management of Seth Bede’s manhood question**

For a man apparently seeking to attain heteronormative manhood, Seth Bede loves earnestly but not aptly. Eliot codes his living and loving behavior so that that the reader might understand how different he is from other men striving for this manhood and consequently accept as reasonable

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<sup>27</sup> Eliot had read Plato by 1852 (Eliot, 1954-1978, II, 59). Her first specific mention of the *Phaedrus* was in 1874 (Eliot, 1954-1978, VI, 99).

<sup>28</sup> Snyder (1999, 5) usefully maps out the complex relationship between bachelors and “masculine heteronormativity,” noting “the paradoxes of the bachelor’s relationship to normative domesticity and normative manhood, and with the ways that these paradoxes make this figure so enigmatic as a speaking and/or writing subject of novelistic narrative discourse.”

<sup>29</sup> My thinking about Eliot’s management strategies is informed by Bernard J. Paris (2003, 13,) who has convincingly argued that, “[a]lthough round, or mimetic, characters are part of the fictional world in which they exist, they are also autonomous beings with a logic of their own” and that “mimetic characters are often put into manipulated plots that have rather arbitrary conclusions.”

his marginal relation to it. Her narrator delicately suggests, for example, that Seth seems more useful at home than at work (where he is ridiculed): the reader learns that he “had learned to make himself, as Adam said, ‘very handy in the housework,’ that he might save his mother from too great a weariness; on which ground I hope you will not think him unmanly, any more than you can have thought the gallant Colonel Bath unmanly when he made the gruel for his invalid sister” (534). The narrator pointedly alludes to the colonel in Henry Fielding’s *Amelia* who, on being discovered, “having on a woman’s bed-gown,” asks, “Do you think I have, during my sister’s illness, behaved with a weakness that savours too much of effeminacy?” (1978, 123-124). By referencing the possibility of unmanliness Eliot acknowledges topical anxieties about masculinities and manhood because in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, effeminacy and transvestism were commonly associated with homoeroticism.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly she codes Seth as someone who has a secret which functions according to what Sedgwick calls a “thematics of absence”: the positing of a secret (the reason why he seems more comfortable and effective at home than at work) and then the denial of its meaningful content because fundamental to its decoding is the assumption that it have “a compulsory content about heterosexuality” (1990, 201).<sup>31</sup> The tacit argument follows thus: Seth is comfortable in a feminine environment; therefore, he is possibly effeminate and unmanly; no, according to heteronormative values that would not make sense. However, according to Sedgwick his social position as a bachelor results in his being “at least partly feminized by his attention to and interest in domestic concerns”; consequently, the reader’s attention is allusively drawn to understanding both Seth’s feminized bachelorhood and its homoerotic bodily potential without having them discussed openly (Sedgwick aptly encapsulates this tacit understanding in the “formula ‘We Know What That Means’”), thereby not threatening the heteronormative stability of both the fictional and reader’s world (1990, 189-190, 204).<sup>32</sup>

His desire, and one might reasonably assume its consequent eroticism, similarly make no heteronormative sense. He expresses his love for Dinah homoerotically, telling her, “I think it’s something passing the love of women as I feel for you” (80). This startling reference to David’s love for Jonathan in the Bible both suggests that the female object of his affection does not match his expressed male-male desire and acknowledges his lack of conventional heterosexual interest in her, and Dinah’s eventual refusal of him implies that she intuits this homoerotic

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Weeks (1977) discusses eighteenth- and nineteenth century associations of transvestism and homosexuality in chapter three.

<sup>31</sup> Seth’s distractedness at work is described in chapters one and twenty seven

<sup>32</sup> Sedgwick (1990, 204) argues,

To have succeeded—which was not to be taken for granted—in cracking the centuries-old code by which the articulated-denial-of-articulability always had the possibility of meaning two things, of meaning either (heterosexual) “nothing” or “homosexual meaning,” would also have been to assume one’s place in a discourse in which there was *a* homosexual meaning, in which all homosexual meaning meant a single thing. To crack a code and enjoy the exhilarations of knowingness is to buy into the specific formula “We Know What That Means.”...But if...men’s accession to heterosexual entitlement has ...always been on the ground of a cultivated and compulsory denial of the unknowability, of the arbitrariness and self-contradictoriness, of homo/heterosexual definition, then the fearful or triumphant formula “We Know What That Means” seems to take on an odd centrality. First it is a lie. But, second, it is the particular lie that animates and perpetuates the mechanism of homophobic male self-ignorance and violence and manipulability.

Eliot’s coding of the homoerotic bodily potential enabled by the enthusiastic Christian bachelorhood of both Seth and Dino depends on this heteronormative and homophobic mechanism.

potential and his unavailability. (Given those popular impressions of enthusiastic Christianity discussed before, the nineteenth-century reader might well imagine that Methodism has exposed her to this kind of homoerotic enthusiasm.) Seth's erotic dynamic exemplifies Sedgwick's observation that, "male heterosexual entitlement"—exemplified by Eliot's heteronormative gaze in the novel and at this stage perhaps by Seth himself—"depends on a perfected but always friable self ignorance in men as to the significance of their desire for other men means that it is always open to women to know something that is much more dangerous for any nonhomosexual identified man to know" (1990, 209-210). If one accepts that Dinah overtly or covertly has these insights about Seth, then her increasing interest in Adam seems less surprising.

In addition to his coded effeminacy derived from how he lives and his homoerotic potential derived from how he loves, Seth offers the reader two more clues about the true nature of his erotic bodily potential. First, after Dinah discourages him, the narrator observes,

I think [Seth's] blue linen handkerchief was very wet with tears long before he made up his mind that it was time for him to set his face steadily homewards. He was but three-and-twenty, and had only just learned what it is to love—to love with that adoration which a young man gives to a woman whom he feels to be greater and better than himself. Love of this sort is hardly distinguishable from religious feeling. What deep and worthy love is so? Whether of a woman or child, or art or music. (81)

Eliot wants us to understand that Seth's capacity to love has been enriched and enabled by his Christian enthusiasm for better or worse: he cries openly (confirming eighteenth-century stereotypes about the emotional enthusiastic temperament), and the excessive, abasing nature of his love is explained by the narrator's insistence that "it is possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings" (82). However, while this description of Seth's love registers the indiscriminate capacity of enthusiastic Christian love, it once again draws attention to what is not being said, to what is obviously absent from the generous list of love objects "hardly distinguishable from religious feeling": enthusiastic Christian love of men is also surely so. Enthusiastic male love is emphasized by virtue of Sedgwick's "thematic of absence." Once again the reader's attention is allusively drawn to understanding Seth homoerotic bodily potential without having it discussed in terms that might threaten the heteronormative stability of both the fictional and reader's world. The second clue concerning the true nature of Seth's bodily potential is given right after he rather suddenly resolves to be a lifelong bachelor at the age of twenty-four. Once alone he recalls a Wesleyan hymn, which implores, "Visit, then, this soul of mine,/Pierce the gloom of sin and grief--/Fill me, Radiancy Divine,/Scatter all my unbelief" (437). Hymn singing provided men a socially appropriate opportunities to express their personal feelings openly, and the hymn Seth chooses suggests that he feels an enthusiastic need to be overcome by passion, to be pierced and filled. This declaration of a passively-experienced ecstasy, which also slyly references Platonic homoerotic enthusiasm, once again illusively suggests that his secret is that Christian enthusiasm enables him to express his desire for passive homoerotic fulfillment (elation similar to that experienced by Dino).

A reasonable corollary to the tacit argument in the novel concerning Seth's possible effeminacy and unmanliness might state, therefore, that if he makes no heteronormative sense, then he will surely not attain heteronormative manhood. His bachelorhood and desire are acknowledged as other-worldly but are not permitted to go out of bounds. Eliot describes Seth's absent-mindedness as manifesting itself in a combination of carelessness, as his failure to

complete the door panels and his leaving his tools behind suggest, and preoccupation, which notes his concern with issues beyond the scope of the reality of the novel's heteronormative world. Adam says of Seth, "There never was such a chap for wool-gathering" (340), and the narrator notes that Adam knew that Seth, "liked to sit full o' thoughts he could give no account of; they'd never come t' anything but they made him happy" (531). Seth intuitively homoerotic desire beyond the heteronormative world of the novel but only has his Methodism as a conduit for exploring such desire within it. Eliot reconciles both Seth's social situation as a peripheral bachelor and his potentially Methodist-enabled transgressive bodily potential with the reality of the novel by domesticating them. This strategy of homoerotic containment triumphs when young Seth remarkably declares, "I'm content, Addy, I'm content" [...] 'I'll be an old bachelor, belike, and make a fuss wi' thy children" (437). After Seth agrees to play this role, whose self-consciousness ("belike") suggests its performative heteronormative expediency, he takes his marginal social place in Adam and Dinah's extended family. At the novel's end Seth is still a young enthusiastic Methodist bachelor. He disagrees with the Conference prohibition of women preaching, noting that "if Dinah had seen as I did, we'd ha' left the Wesleyans and joined a body that 'ud put no bonds on Christian liberty" (583). The proscriptive heteronormativity shared by the author, the novel, and the reader has licensed as reasonable the containment of his enthusiastic Christianity's bodily potential. Given the Methodist precedent of support for men interested in homoeroticism and male-male sexuality, the interested reader is left to wonder how this kind of liberty might also have freed Seth Bede to become an embodied and fulfilled enthusiastic Christian bachelor. Sedgwick notes that the bodily potential of the bachelor is managed when he "is housebroken by the severing of his connections with a discourse of genital sexuality" (1990, 190); and his presence on the periphery of Adam and Dinah's heteronormative family ensures that Seth has undergone this kind of "sexual anesthesia" by the end of the novel (1990, 194).

### **Dino de Bardi, homosexual panic, and spermatorrhea**

Dino's enthusiastic Catholicism represents a retreat into a secluded bachelor domesticity where one might go out of bounds. This Christian bachelorhood is presented as being of questionable social value because of its effects on Dino's family; moreover, its bodily potential is subversive because his homoerotic Catholicism is boldly embodied. Dino's monastic community affords him a circumstantial possibility for consummated male-male desire not available to Seth Bede, and unlike Seth, he expresses his homoerotic desire for a man (albeit allusively and tentatively), moreover, it is registered as such by both of them and easily decoded by the reader. Eliot manages his homoerotic containment by suggesting that his illness is symptomatic of his having violated the spermatic economy: both Dino's bachelor selfishness and his occasioning Tito's homosexual panic threaten to destabilize the heteronormative world of the novel; consequently, it does not seem unreasonable, and, indeed, it might seem fitting, that he dies of what seems to be a kind of *spermatorrhea*.

Instead of dutifully providing for Bardo and Romola, Dino selfishly secludes himself with others who have chosen to live an enthusiastic Christian bachelorhood. Dino rather cultivates his spiritual self and opens himself up to its ecstatic consequences. Bardo faults him for "prostrat[ing] himself under the influences of a dim mysticism which eludes all rules of human duty as it eludes all argument"; Romola condemns "the brand of the dastardly undutifulness which had left her father desolate" (180, 209). Dino wants to leave behind guilt and social proscription, seeking a place "in which there would be no uneasy hunger after

pleasure, no tormenting questions, no fear of suffering," where this uneasy desire is not open to ethical interrogation or fear, where desire is transformed into a passively felt ecstasy (Dino asserts that "in visions and dreams we are passive, and our souls are as an instrument in the Divine hand") (212,213). He tellingly describes his transformative conversion as one in which, "the Divine love had sought me, and penetrated me, and created a great need in me; like a seed that wants room to grow" (212). Enthusiastic Christianity has not only possessed him, but it has caused a *metanoia*, reorienting him to pursue this ecstasy as an essential part of his identity. He claims to have "had a foreshadowing" of Christian ecstasy because "the same truth had penetrated even in pagan philosophy" (212). This foreshadowing suggests that his ecstatic desire, experienced through this penetration, transcends belief-systems, manifested in both the classical and Christian roots of enthusiasm.<sup>33</sup> (He had already experienced "the vain words which record the passions of dead men" by which he had "been tempted into sin" which suggests that he feels classicism did not sufficiently offer the morally sanctioned cover, offered by Renaissance Roman Catholicism, for this pursuit (212).) As she did with Seth, Eliot codes Dino's enthusiasm so that its Platonic and Christian homoerotic potential are evident to the careful reader.

Dino's transgressive bodily potential is apparent when Tito first sees Dino. What ensues is a coded mutual homoerotic inquiry which the dramatic action of the novel then deflects to a situation of vulnerability coded as homosexual panic. Tito first notes Dino's meaningful glance at him which affects him vaguely but pleasantly:

he saw a man's face upturned towards him, and fixing on him a gaze that seemed to have more meaning in it than the ordinary passing observation of a stranger. It was a face with a tonsured head, that rose above the black mantel and white tunic of a Dominican friar--a very common sight in Florence; but the glance had something peculiar in it for Tito. There was a faint suggestion in it, certainly not of an unpleasant kind....The glance and the suggestion hardly took longer than a flash of lightning. (135)

Dino's meaningful "gaze," with its peculiar "glance" elliptically tells the reader that Dino acknowledges Tito's beauty. (Even Bernado del Nero describes Tito as "pretty" (121,122.)) Tito,

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<sup>33</sup> On his death bed Dino remarks on the bodily potential of classical studies: "I have never repented fleeing from the stifling poison-breath of sin that was hot and thick around me, and threatened to steal over my senses like besotting wine....I told [Bardo] the studies he wished me to live for were either childish trifling--dead toys--or else they must be made warm and living by pulses that beat to worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts, for worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts made all the substance of the poetry and history he wanted me to bend my eyes on continually" (211). Dino sees paganism as sinful and "besotting"--the same word Bardo uses to describe Dino's relationship with the friars. Both connotations of the word--drunkenness and foolish infatuation--surely apply here as Dino describes his struggle against sinfulness, uselessness ("dead toys"), "worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts" in terms of a misuse of his bodily potential. As if rejecting the homoerotic potential in Platonic philosophy, Romola protests that their father "never wished [Dino] to live for worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts" but rather "according to the purest maxims of philosophy" (211). Dino obviously seems susceptible to its homoerotic potential. Tito astutely notes that Dino's "passionate nature drove him to act out what other men write and talk about"--"a form of theosophy which has been the common disease of excitable dreamy minds in all ages"--a philosophy likened to that of the "Neo Platonists" (237). Eliot's use of this phrase acknowledges how enthusiastic classical philosophy was often used by Victorian men to justify homosocial and homosexual relationships between men. For more on this use of the classics see Crompton (1985, 286-87); Dellamora (1990, 24); on Platonism and same-sex desire in the 1860s see Dellamora (1990, 49); Dowling (1994, 66, 78, 94-96) and Croft-Cooke 59.

in turn, is not offended by this tribute and even regards positively what Sedgwick has called an obvious but unspoken “possibility of *desire for* [a] man” (1990, 211). When they eventually meet, this acknowledgment of Tito’s physical attractiveness is again emphasized, and the implications of possible male-male desire drains both of them, leaving Dino tired and Tito unmanned. Dino asks him, “Pardon me, but--from your face and your ring [...] is not your name Tito Melema?” (164). The reader’s attention is then drawn to what is written on the outside of Baldassarre Calvo’s letter, “*Tito Melema, aged twenty-three, with a dark, beautiful face, long curls, the brightest smile, and a large onyx ring on his right forefinger,*” which permits, at Dino’s tactful suggestion (evident in his phrase, “your face and your ring”), a public acknowledgment of male-male desire between the two men (164). Eliot codes Tito’s possible erotic response to Dino by noting that “once again” Dino’s face “brought some strong but indefinite reminiscences to Tito,” another reminder of Dino’s resemblance to Romola, the eventual object of Tito’s affection (164). Dino’s touching of Tito momentarily unmans, even feminizes Tito, causing him “to shrink and turn pale like a maiden” (164). Dino is left exhausted by the meeting, having just enough energy to give Tito his name and his address! The reader has just witnessed the “shock of the possibility” of homoeroticism enabled by an enthusiastic Catholic iconographic discourse (Sedgwick 1990, 140).

This situation then becomes one of coded “homosexual panic,” Sedgwick’s phrase for the “*blackmailability* [...] through the level of homophobia,” manifest in a “private, psychologized form” (1985, 89); and this acknowledged fear of discovery is overtly understood as the possible exposing of Tito’s past by Dino because of his knowledge of the letter and its implication for revealing Tito’s history. Covertly, we know what Dino’s secret knowledge about Tito means to them; however, any possible future homoerotic encounter is managed by the narrator’s emphasizing Dino’s unnaturalness and unhealthiness, and given the pathological discourses about bachelor sexuality, we all know what that means.<sup>34</sup> Tito notices Dino because “he felt a very thin cold hand laid on his”; he notes that Dino’s face “looked more evidently worn by sickness and not by age” (164). The disastrous moral and physical consequences for living as a “degenerate” with “besotted friars” are elliptically suggested when Dino is presented to the reader: he is feminized; perhaps effeminate, given his selfish and passive bachelorhood; and his unnaturalness explains not only in his power to unman, but also in his illness. Dino is described as having “a face [...] evidently work by sickness,” having a voice that “become[s] feebler and feebler,” as “very ill,” as “worn to a shadow” with “deep-sunken hazel eyes” (164, 169, 211). Compare this description to the following: “The frame is stunted and weak, the muscles undeveloped, the eye is sunken and heavy, the complexion is sallow, pasty...the hands are damp and cold and the skin is moist [...] His intellect has become sluggish and enfeebled” (Acton 1975, 50). Dr. Acton describes here the symptoms of regular masturbation as they were understood in the nineteenth-century; they list the physical consequences of upsetting the spermatic economy. Because of his selfish abandonment of his social obligation to his family and because of his homoerotic use of his bodily potential, Dino’s bodily violation of that economy has had both physical and social consequences, and in the heteronormative nineteenth-century world of Eliot and her readers his illness and death would have seemed a credible—even reasonable—result. When Dino dies, he takes both his knowledge of Tito’s past and Tito’s secret homoerotic awareness with him to the

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<sup>34</sup> Eliot’s subsequent treatment of Dino strangely mirrors the strategy of the twentieth-century “‘homosexual panic’ defense” which she describes as an “ability to permit and ‘place,’ by pathologizing, the enactment of a socially sanctioned prejudice against one stigmatized minority” (1990, 20).

grave. Dino's death placates both the heteronormative homosexual panic of Eliot and the reader and forestalls Tito's *blackmailability*.

## Conclusion

In her fiction Eliot occludes potentially homoerotic enthusiastic Christian bachelor manhood. Be their desire anaesthetized or pathologized, Seth Bede and Dino De' Bardi are contained, nonetheless, within a secure heteronormative world view. The bachelorhood they represent, however, signified beyond the reality of their respective works; it also contributed to the dialogue of nineteenth-century authors and readers on masculinities and manhood. Other enthusiastic Christian bachelors in Eliot's fiction might be read as rejoinders to Seth's and Dino's contemplative homoeroticism: Silas Marner and Savonarola model chaste, productive masculinities that are reconciled to heteronormativity. One might clearly see how Silas attains a supplementary form of heteronormative manhood by subjugating his homoerotic and masturbatory desire into "a playacting of heterosexuality" (Sedgwick, 1990, 206). Savonarola models a productive form of subjugated male desire, yet he attains martyrdom rather than manhood. Dino's coded potential homoerotic sensibility combined with Piero di Cosimo's aesthetic philosophy, however, may well have contributed to the homoerotic- and enthusiasm-positive work of Walter Pater. Ironically, as David DeLaura (1966) and William J. Sullivan (1972) have argued, Eliot's *Romola* inadvertently inspired Walter Pater's allusive, veiled aesthetic enthusiasm whose subversive impact was felt in the *fin-de-siècle*.<sup>35</sup> Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, coded a recognizable aesthetic homoeroticism without containing it within a secure heteronormative moral universe.<sup>36</sup> Both authors were certainly instrumental in creating a homoerotic poetics that enabled positive homosexual masculinities and manhood in the next century.

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<sup>35</sup> In *The renaissance* (1980, 152) Pater clearly associates enthusiasm with aesthetics and homoeroticism. Concerning Winckelmann, Pater suggests that,

Enthusiasm,—that, in the broadest Platonic sense of the *Phaedrus*, was the secret of his divinatory power over the Hellenic world. This enthusiasm, dependent as it is to a great degree on bodily temperament, has a power of reinforcing the purest emotions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement. That his affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, that the subtler threads of temperament were inwoven in it, is proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men. He has known, he says, many young men more beautiful than Guido's archangel. These friendships, bringing him into contact with the pride of human form, and staining the thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek sculpture.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Ellman (1988, 305) argues that "Aestheticism [...] modified the relationship between the reader and the writer. If matter once the exclusive preserve of pornography could be breached, then the reader's calm and sense of unthreatened distance were violable. Many young men and women leaned of the existence of uncelebrated forms of love through the hints in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*."

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