Masculinity and the Expansion of Women's Rights in Ben Griffin's *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*

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1 This monograph offers a thorough history of the fight for women's rights in Britain during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Ben Griffin's writing is engaging and clear, and he offers a unique perspective on gender studies of the Victorian period. Griffin recognizes the extraordinary strides made by British women in terms of their political and legal status during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but he argues that studies of the women's movement only offer insight into part of the picture. For Griffin, in order to fully understand how women could gain more power, one must also study the men who gave over some of their power to women. He does not devalue the women's movement, but he attempts to construct a broader picture of the climate in which these changes took place (the Married Women's Property Act, the Infant Custody Act, the Matrimonial Causes Act, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts). He thus focuses his attention on the men serving in parliament and "the context of the broader liberal and conservative ideologies that animated their political behavior" (25).

2 Griffin begins by deconstructing the idea that male politicians were either for or against women's rights. By tracking the votes of MPs on issues like suffrage and married women's property rights, Griffin shows that most MPs did not vote consistently on bills related to women. Griffin highlights this disconnect to show that the debates over women's roles in society were complex and that MPs switched sides, changed their minds, and were pressured by more than one political interest and ideological force.

3 From here, Griffin delves into the political, religious, and ideological pressures that contributed to the ways MPs voted for or against bills that affected women's rights. One of the most intriguing arguments of the book is in Chapter 3 when Griffin focuses on the tension between politicians' desire to defend the masculinity of elites and their wish to extend rights for women. In other words, these men needed to find a way to preserve their own power while also acknowledging the abuse of women at the hands of men. They tactfully accomplished this by pointing to poverty as the primary cause of domestic violence and promiscuity and shifting the

scrutiny from powerful aristocrats to the poor. This political maneuvering allowed MPs to pose "as disinterested defenders of working-class girls" (105). Griffin effectively describes this process:

> politicians were reluctant to accept that their own homes should be affected by changes to women's rights, both because they feared that these changes would reduce their domestic authority and create discord in their homes, and because they did not think that the critique of male behavior which justified the reforms should apply to them or their class. The stakes in these debates were considerable: the political legitimacy of the governing male elites rested on their ability to construct identities as disinterested and virtuous husbands, fathers and legislators. For these reasons, their ability to confine both charges and abuse and the effects of the Acts to the poor was essential to the successful passage of the Married Women's Property Acts. (109)

By pointing the finger at lower-class men as the perpetrators of domestic abuse and tyranny, MPs could distance themselves from scrutiny while also conceding power to women and being seen as reformers who were concerned with making conditions better for the poor. Griffin goes on to make clear that this strategy only worked for so long. By the end of the nineteenth century, elite men were unable to distance themselves from criticism—especially as new woman novels challenged upper-class male sexuality directly—and by the start of the new century, "it was much harder for elite men to construct a defence of patriarchal privilege on the basis of their own claims to virtue, and the strained assumptions of Victorian domestic ideology were left hopelessly exposed in an unforgiving new environment" (108).

4 Central to Griffin's argument is that "debates about women's rights were often also debates about masculinity, and that politicians' actions were fundamentally shaped by the identities that they constructed as men" (309). In Chapter 6, Griffin focuses on a couple of men whose performances of masculinity in parliament reveal the interconnectedness of the women's rights movement and understandings of Victorian "manliness." Sir Henry James, for example, gave a speech in 1871 in which he powerfully reinforced the framework of separate spheres and successfully persuaded some MPs to change their positions on women's suffrage. James "insisted that women were too ignorant and emotional to involve themselves with politics, that participation in public life would corrupt women's moral sensibility, and that women's proper responsibility was to care for their families in the domestic sphere" (164). Griffin notes that James's ideas were not particularly new, although his speech was influential, but that James had reasons beyond simple anti-suffragism for making his public plea. Griffin claims that it was an

act meant to gain attention and align him with a normative masculine identity since, in reality, James did not fit the mold of an ideal Victorian man. He never married and was rumored to have had a sexual relationship with Lord Randolph Churchill and several illegitimate children. These rumors cannot be substantiated, but his reputation and standing among other MPs make his public stances on suffrage intriguing works of self-fashioning. “In those speeches,” Griffin writes, “he posed as the defender of conventional gender norms but in practice his relationship to those norms was profoundly ambiguous at best” (166). Griffin’s analysis in this chapter is particularly convincing and new; “The argument is that posing as defenders of the patriarchal order proved extremely attractive to men whose claims to ‘manliness’ were profoundly insecure, because parliamentary performance offered a way for men whose own masculine status was uncertain to claim the authority of the culturally dominant normative masculinity” (167). This finely articulated examination of gender performance adds another layer to our contemporary understanding of how Victorian women were subjected to the power plays of men and shows that men’s positions were being renegotiated while women were gaining more power in the public sphere.

5 Overall, Griffin’s study is helpful, clear, and revealing. Not only is the book a thorough historical study that allows for a more nuanced understanding of social reforms during the Victorian period, but it is also a helpful reminder that political debate and reform is never simple. This monograph is approachable enough for students of Victorian history and complex and detailed enough for seasoned scholars. Those who research and write about women’s history, British politics, masculinity studies, and even Victorian literature will find *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain* helpful in their work.