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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8448>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.8448

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

"Maria Pirgerou on Peter Messent's *Mark Twain and Male Friendship*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 15, Online since 27 May 2010, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8448> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.8448>

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- 1 Peter Messent, *Mark Twain and Male Friendship: The Twichell, Howells and Rogers Friendships*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 272. Cloth. ISBN 978-0-19-539116-9.
- 2 Peter Messent's book seeks to explore the lifelong relationships between Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), one of the most prominent literary figures of post-Civil War America, and three equally renowned men of the same period: the minister Joseph Twichell, the literary editor and author William Dean Howells and the shrewd businessman Henry Huttleston Rogers. Based both on the correspondence shared between Clemens and each of the afore-mentioned men as well as on biographical evidence, Messent's meticulous research aims to situate the friendships it explores within the culturally sanctioned homosocial continuum which defined the masculine norm in the middle and late nineteenth century drawing from the work of distinguished gender theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Gail Bederman, Anthony Rotundo and Sarah Rose Cole among others. Additionally, Messent attempts to further investigate these friendships against the background of each man's matrimonial obligations and familial ties as experienced and developed in the light of the normative bourgeois domestic ideology in which all men belonged, not failing to emphasize the "white," "heterosexual," "upper-middle class" orientation of all the four men involved in his project.
- 3 Thus, the initial chapters of Messent's book (2 & 3) focus on the friendship developed between Samuel Clemens and Joe Twichell, the popular pastor of Hartford's Asylum Hill Congregationalist Church from 1865 until about 1912. Hartford, the wealthy Connecticut area, had been Twain's place of residence after his marriage to Olivia Langdon (1877). Messent's contention in these chapters is primarily to demonstrate the difference both in class and background between the two men against which their lifelong friendship was forged. Twichell's embodiment of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of muscular Christianity, Messent argues, as well as his service in the Civil War during which he encountered men of lesser religious conviction but of greater courage and bravery had enabled Twichell to regard Clemens's religious agnosticism with tolerance

and open-mindedness, a point of view which sustained the warmth and understanding the two men shared throughout their lives. Moreover, their close bond, Messent claims, had its impact on Clemens's literary career as a number of his literary characters were, in fact, modeled after Twichell—for example “Mr. Harris” in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880). Clemens's friendship with Twichell functioned particularly well, Messent demonstrates, both in terms of family relationships and on “one-to-one fraternal interaction,” while the “juvenile quality” which characterized it endowed it with a playful—albeit marginal—element (55). The social rewards both men reaped out of this on-going relationship were equally important to both, Messent argues, as Twain and Twichell established firmly rooted cultural positions of bourgeois respectability in the community they inhabited. Despite their later fall-out due to Twichell's overt support of Roosevelt's imperialist policies and Twain's vehement disapproval of such practices, the two men's friendship continued—mainly through correspondence—even after Clemens's move to New York from 1904 until 1908. In fact, Messent claims, Clemens's gradual move away from Twichell was largely due to the latter's “solid predictability” and defense of the social, political and religious status quo (81). Their parting was indicative both of Clemens's individual radicalism but also of a larger American reality in which religion and its ministers gradually lost the influence they once held.

- 4 The following two chapters of the book (4 & 5) concentrate on Clemens's relationship with a most influential literary figure of post-bellum America, William Dean Howells. Focusing on the latter's contribution to and promotion of Mark Twain's writings, Messent claims here that the Clemens-Howells relationship and collaborative work was mainly dominated by their mutual drive for professional and financial success. Through their correspondence and shared professional schemes Messent discerns a long-lasting friendship of mutually subversive quality, but firmly rooted in such bourgeois principles as married life, respectability and acclaimed social position. Both men's radical political views and their critique of American expansionist politics “compromised their public reputation” to a certain extent as they were both trapped between two opposing poles of “radical opinion and public concession,” which affected the rest of their lives (96). Apart from the two men's shared political radicalism, their literary commitment to the mode of realism served as another common ground which strengthened their friendship. For instance, Twain's narrative *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1886), clearly suggests, according to most of its reviewers and critics, an evident relationship between Howells's notion of realism as a cultural force and Clemens's literary practice. As Messent observes, however, Clemens's comic art “could not be contained by his friend's narrow definitions,” and was, as a result, “multidimensional in kind” (117).
- 5 Chapters 6 and 7 of the book deal, as can be expected, with the friendship between Clemens and Henry Rogers, “one of the most ruthless businessmen and financial speculators in the country” (127). Rogers's successful support of Twain's financial interests, then at grave risk due to the economic depression of 1893, forged a friendship which did not fit normal class categories according to Messent, but nonetheless lasted throughout the two men's lives. In his discussion of the particular kind of friendship, Messent deftly situates his analysis within the larger cultural context predicating specific roles for men in nineteenth century America. The construction of masculinity in this period, the author argues, befitted Rogers's image and masculine ethos of the successful entrepreneur, while, on the other hand, Clemens's “domesticated masculinity” –a term Messent borrows from Margaret Marsh and her analysis of the

construction of masculinity in the same period—marked a deviation from the normative bourgeois ideal. Thus, in the correspondence between the two men, Messent identifies an increasing anxiety, on Clemens's part, concerning his male identity within changing conceptions of masculinity at the time. Due to the recurrent cycle of economic depression, culture gradually veered away from a conception of masculinity solely defined by the business ethos of the self-made man towards more flexible forms of male identity. Within this faltering ideological framework, Clemens's friendship with Rogers relied a great deal on the latter's assertiveness in taking care of Twain's business affairs but it was a friendship also "predicated on equality" since Twain never actually relinquished his role as a "ventured capitalist and businessman" (132). The strong attachment between the two men, best expressed in the jocularity of their correspondence, and Clemens's growing anxiety about his male authority being diminished both economically and on the domestic setting, had, according to Messent, a profound impact on Clemens's writings of the last decade during which the representation of gender roles in his work are completely awry. Moreover, Clemens's association with Rogers, their sharing of all male activities and gentlemanly privileges of the time, often characterized by "good humour, the use of a register of language beyond conventional genteel boundaries, and the mutual exchange of light-hearted insults," allowed Twain to participate in and enjoy the company of the social elite but without relinquishing his radical questioning of the political establishment (148). The gap, therefore, which existed between Clemens's private agenda and the extended social circle of white wealthy men of which he partook, largely increased the anxiety Twain felt regarding his culturally defined male selfhood.

- 6 In the last chapter of this book Messent deals with a common characteristic shared by three of the men he discussed: the unexpected death of their young daughters and the extent to which Twain's friendship with each of the bereaved men was affected by these tragic events. Commenting on the anxiety-ridden father-daughter relationship which characterized the Victorian Age and the context of over-protection which made them problematic, Messent discusses the untimely deaths of Sally Twichell, Winifred Howells and Suzy Clemens as well as the practices of mourning undertaken by their respective families. Idealizing their deceased daughters, all three mourners seemed to seek refuge and consolation in the nuclear family, rather than one another, isolating it from the larger, extended community. Messent sees this expression of mourning—the individuation of grief—as culturally specific indicating "the impact of the competitiveness of the individual and the transience which marked a modernizing capitalist economy" (166). This conclusion further adds to Messent's larger thesis that the Twain, Twichell, Howells and Rogers friendship was permeated by a mundane logic which was gradually replaced by an increasing sense of individuation and separateness with emphasis on nuclear family bonds.
- 7 All in all, Messent's detailed account of Twain's friendships, his lucid argumentation, supported by his carefully researched and meticulously selected evidence, constructs a significant contribution not only to Twain's scholarship but also to the underexplored and often contradictory area of the Victorian masculine ethos in the United States. The author's insightful remarks as well as his findings can be of fundamental importance to students and scholars alike, researching the obscure and occasionally ambiguous patriarchal conceptualization of manliness and male identity in this period.
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