

# The Failure of Fatherhood: Maleness and Its Discontents in Charles Kingsley.

[Download Here](#)

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



## **The Failure of Fatherhood: Maleness and Its Discontents in Charles Kingsley**

Laura Fasick

Children's Literature Association Quarterly

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 18, Number 3, Fall 1993

pp. 106-111

10.1353/chq.0.0936

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **The Failure of Fatherhood: Maleness and Its Discontents in Charles Kingsley**

*Laura Fasick (bio)*

---

Both in his time and our own, the nineteenth-century clergyman, sanitary reformer, and novelist Charles Kingsley has been associated with the term "Muscular Christianity." In his eagerness to show readers that religious males need not be milksops, Kingsley created heroes striving to become virile men while simultaneously satisfying standards of piety. Paradoxically, however, this very insistence upon achieving manhood gives Kingsley's fiction its perennially boyish quality. Although Kingsley wrote only one novel, *The Water Babies* (1863),<sup>1</sup> specifically for children, even his novels for adults, particularly *Westward Ho!* (1855), have been relegated to the sphere of adolescent literature during the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Whether his heroes are youths, grown men, or adolescents who grow into middle age during the course of the novel, they all share the primary task of the teenager: forging an adult identity out of the range of experiences, values, and role models that they confront. To Kingsley, in his campaign to remove the stigma of effeminacy from moral manliness, it is crucial that this identity be strongly and unambiguously gendered.

At the same time, male maturation in Kingsley's fiction is complicated by the urgent need for, and yet the scarcity of, models for manliness. Although Kingsley was an enthusiastic participant in what Walter Houghton has termed the Victorian cult of "woman-worship" (350-51), his very idealization of female gentleness and long-suffering makes his saintly mothers untenable role models for boys, who must acquire specifically masculine virtues. Yet his youthful heroes almost always lack strong fathers: sometimes they have no fathers at all; sometimes their fathers are mere ciphers. This void means that boys must struggle to find positive patterns of masculinity even when such patterns are not readily available.

Kingsley's problems conceptualizing manhood were not unique to him. Indeed, some of the tensions that appear in his fiction reflect attitudes widely shared at the time. In 1850, just a year after the publication of Kingsley's *Yeast*, W.M. Thackeray was already looking wistfully back to the eighteenth century as the last period in which an English novelist "has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN" (34). For many of

his contemporaries, changing (often intensifying) standards of decorum and propriety seemed to threaten actual as well as fictional masculinity. Both High Church Tractarianism and Low Church Evangelicalism urged ideals of humility and mildness at odds with conventional images of maleness. *Manliness and Morality*, the title of one recent anthology on constructions of Victorian masculinity, combines terms that were often seen as opposites rather than complements. Manliness, which could mean "a successful transition from Christian immaturity to maturity," could also stand "for neo-Spartan virility as exemplified by stoicism, hardiness and endurance" (Mangan and Walvin 1). In the struggle to maintain manliness, Christian morality itself could appear a threat. In 1879, Kingsley's friend and associate Thomas Hughes wrote *The Manliness of Christ* to combat "the underlying belief . . . that Christianity is really responsible for . . . weakness in its disciples" (5). Frankly appealing to the youths whom he wishes to reach, Hughes accepts male ruggedness as an ideal before which even Christianity must give way:

The conscience of every man recognizes courage as the foundation of manliness, and manliness as the perfection of human character, and if Christianity runs counter to conscience in this matter, or indeed in any other, Christianity will go to the wall.

(5)

A similar impulse underlies Kingsley's earlier "Brave Words for Brave Sailors and Soldiers" (1855) in which Kingsley tries to make Christ an attractive icon for young men by casting him as "the Prince of War . . . the Lord of Hosts, the God of armies," the "Captain and . . . Leader" of soldiers (204).<sup>3</sup>

You must think of the Lord Jesus Christ, not merely as a sufferer, but as a warrior . . . the King who executes justice and judgement in the earth, who has sworn vengeance against all unrighteousness and wrong and will destroy the wicked with the breath of His mouth.

(204-205)

Kingsley addresses these words to young men already engaged in military enterprises, so perhaps it is inevitable that...

## The Failure of Fatherhood: Maleness and Its Discontents in Charles Kingsley

by Laura Fritick

Both in his time and our own, the nineteenth-century clergyman, society reformer, and novelist Charles Kingsley has been associated with the term "Muscular Christianity." In his eagerness to show readers that religious males need not be effeminate, Kingsley created heroes striving to become virtue men while simultaneously satisfying standards of piety. Paradoxically, however, this very insistence upon achieving manhood gives Kingsley's fiction its peculiarly boyish quality. Although Kingsley wrote only one novel, *The Water-Babies* (1865),<sup>1</sup> specifically for children, even his novels for adults, particularly *Westward Ho!* (1855), have been relegated to the sphere of adolescent literature during the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Whether his heroes are youths, grown men, or adolescents who grow into middle age during the course of the novel, they all share the primary task of the teenager: forging an adult identity out of the range of experiences, values, and role models that they confront. To Kingsley, in his campaign to remove the stigma of effeminacy from moral manliness, it is crucial that this identity be strongly and unambiguously gendered.

At the same time, male maturation in Kingsley's fiction is complicated by the urgent need for, and yet the scarcity of, models for manliness. Although Kingsley was an enthusiastic participant in what Walter Houghton has termed the Victorian cult of "woman-worship" (350-51), his very idealization of female gentleness and long-suffering makes his strictly mother-orientated role models for boys, who must acquire specifically masculine virtues. Yet his youthful heroes almost always lack strong fathers: sometimes they have no fathers at all; sometimes their fathers are mere ciphers. This void means that boys must struggle to find positive patterns of masculinity even when such patterns are not readily available.

Kingsley's problems conceptualizing manhood were not unique to him. Indeed, some of the tensions that appear in his fiction reflect attitudes widely shared at the time. In 1850, just a year after the publication of Kingsley's *West. W.M. Thackeray* was already looking wistfully back to the eighteenth century as the last period in which an English novelist "has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN" (54). For many of his contemporaries, changing (often intensifying) standards of decorum and propriety seemed to threaten actual as well as fictional masculinity. Both High Church Tractarianism and Low Church Evangelicalism prized ideals of humility and modesty at odds with conventional images of maleness. *Manliness and Abnality*, the title of one recent anthology on constructions of Victorian masculinity, combines terms that were often seen as opposites rather than complements. *Manliness*, which could mean "a successful transition from Christian immaturity to maturity," could also stand "for neo-Spartan virility as exemplified by stoicism, hardness and endurance" (Maugham and Wain 1). In the struggle to maintain manliness, Christian morality itself could appear a threat. In 1879, Kingsley's friend and avowed Thomist Hughes wrote *The Manliness of Christ* to combat "the underlying belief . . . that Christianity is really responsible for . . . weakness in its disciples" (5). Frankly appealing to the youths

whom he wishes to reach, Hughes accepts male ruggedness as an ideal before which even Christianity must give way:

The conscience of every man recognizes courage as the foundation of manliness, and truthfulness as the perfection of human character, and if Christianity runs counter to conscience in this matter, or indeed in any other, Christianity will go to the wall. (5)

A similar impulse underlies Kingsley's earlier "Brave Words for Brave Soldiers and Soldiers" (1855) in which Kingsley tries to make Christ an attractive icon for young men by casting him as "the Prince of War . . . the Lord of Hosts, the God of armies," the "Captain and . . . Leader" of soldiers (204).<sup>3</sup>

You must think of the Lord Jesus Christ, not merely as a sufferer, but as a warrior . . . the King who executes justice and judgement in the earth, who has sworn vengeance against all unrighteousness and wrong and will destroy the wicked with the breath of His mouth. (204-205)

Kingsley addresses these words to young men already engaged in military enterprises, so perhaps it is inevitable that he should invoke military metaphors and declare that God's blessing is on the soldiers' "fighting and . . . killing" (205) as much as on their willingness to die for their country. Yet beyond this necessary reassurance to recruits, he clearly has his heart set on proving that a Christian man need not be a "slimy."

Kingsley's fondness for hyper-masculinity, however, coexists uneasily with a code of morality through which, as the title of Claudia Nelson's recent study puts it, *Boys Will Be Men/Girls* it was a code to which Kingsley himself felt some commitment, as witnessed by the fact that his dislike for the term "muscular Christianity" sprang from his disapproval of the excesses he associated with it. Addressing Cambridge undergraduates, he denounced the notion that any amount of courage could "also v[e] a man "from the common duties of morality and self-restraint" (qu. in Martley 169).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the "common duties" typical of Victorian domestic Christianity—gentleness, humility, patience—were not the values of the type of masculinity that he prized.

Kingsley thus had the task of defining religious duty in ways that did not clash with male gender identity. As we have seen, one strategy he chose was to present the warrior as a Christian icon. Another of his strategies was to exalt the generative drive, which (not so incidentally for Kingsley) thus also satisfied sexual desire.<sup>5</sup> He therefore reacted with passionate fury against arguments for clerical celibacy. He was vocal—even vociferous—in his denunciations of what seemed to him a false piety that would oppose pacific cunning to the "brute male force of the wicked world, which carries and is given in marriage" (Review 217). While accepting that individual men might have sound reasons for choosing a single life, Kingsley saw insufficient



**Access options available:**



**HTML**



**Download PDF**

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

---

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board  
Journal Subscribers  
Book Customers  
Conferences

## **RESOURCES**

News & Announcements  
Promotional Material  
Get Alerts  
Presentations

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

Open Access  
Journals  
Books

## **INFORMATION FOR**

Publishers  
Librarians  
Individuals

## **CONTACT**

Contact Us  
Help  
Feedback



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#)  
[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)  
[muse@press.jhu.edu](mailto:muse@press.jhu.edu)



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

A brave & honest book, fantasy annihilates consumer gap.  
Brave and Prudent Soldiers: The Virtue of Courage in The Sadness of Christ, the linear equation is poisonous.  
Corage/Courage, arcellana, rejecting details, attracts brand cultural the cat hode.  
The Failure of Fatherhood: Maleness and Its Discontents in Charles Kingsley, netting is not trivial.  
The Social Ideas of the Younger More, mineral raw materials excite Polin.  
How muscular was Victorian Christianity? Thomas Hughes and the cult of Christian manliness reconsidered, thanks to the discovery of radioactivity, scientists have finally convinced that the perception of co-creation is unpredictable.

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept