

**Wieland Schwanebeck.** *Der flexible Mr. Ripley: Männlichkeit und Hochstapelei in Literatur und Film.* Literatur-Kultur-Geschlecht Vol. 66. Köln et al.: Böhlau, 2014. 388 pp. Pb. € 54.90. ISBN 978-3-412-22363-2.

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As any construction of identity relies on individual performance and socio-cultural recognition and validation, acts of imposture simply make us aware of the parameters underlying identity formation in general. Impostors succeed because they emulate cultural expectations, norms, and claims to authenticity so accurately that their identity seems real to us. Wieland Schwanebeck's book *Der flexible Mr. Ripley. Männlichkeit und Hochstapelei in Literatur und Film* is set against the background of these issues and adds to them queries about the construction of masculinity. In the book's introductory first part of about one hundred pages, the author theorizes, investigates, and interconnects the three fields of imposture, masculinity, and narratology. The longer analytical part applies and illustrates these findings on Patricia Highsmith's Mr. Ripley sequel, taking into account film adaptations of her novels as well – among them Anthony Minghella's 1999 film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Wim Wenders' 1977 film *Der amerikanische Freund* based on *Ripley's Game*.

Schwanebeck starts out by analyzing the term impostor as well as looking into forms and functions of imposture in different historical contexts and disciplinary fields, ranging from law and sociology to literature and narratology. He convincingly argues that impostor narratives have thrived particularly well in a US-American context because founding myths such as the self-made man, rags-to-riches, and the pursuit of happiness have provided a fertile ground for re-inventions of the self, for con games, and instances of self-fashioning. With recourse to masculinity studies and gender narratology, in the following, Schwanebeck likens imposture to constructions of masculinity in general. By drawing on constructivist approaches to masculinity studies, on the one hand, and on theories of narrating gender by Mieke Bal or Susan Lanser, on the other, Schwanebeck postulates that not only male imposture but masculinity per se is the outcome of representational narrative strategies. Schwanebeck is interested in masculinity – whether ‘true’ or ‘fake’ – not only as a literary subject matter but as an identity produced by the particular means and manners of literary representation. The book’s main thesis is that imposture and constructions of masculinity as represented in literary texts both rest on narrative mediation and focalization. If imposture, Schwanebeck infers, simply exaggerates fundamental parameters of any identity construction, then we can read literary representations of male impostors as paradigmatic for constructions of male and masculine identities in general. Male impostors would then reflect values and discourses of masculinity that circulate in a society at a given time. Referring to the works of, for instance, Harry Brod, Michael Kimmel, and Michael Chabon, Schwanebeck contentiously argues that in a society based on patriarchal and capitalist values, the performance of masculinity always requires pretense and masquerade. Therefore men, in order to pass as ‘real’ men, have to fake it. Consequently, Schwanebeck reads the motif of the impostor as a “nützliche Metapher für die Grundverfasstheit von Männlichkeit” (104) and concludes “Wenn Männlichkeit eine Form von Maskerade ist, dann lässt sie sich als eine Form von Hochstapelei konzeptualisieren” (ibid.). Or as Michael Chabon, quoted in Schwanebeck, puts it, “the essence of traditional male virtue lies in imposture [...]” (105). The same, one may want to add, naturally, holds true for constructions of femininity. If imposture is understood as one possible narrative performance among many possible others, then the boundaries between what is a “true” and what is a ‘fake’ identity blur. In other words, there can never be a real identity behind or beyond the faked one, just another story which relies on other rules of authentication.

The book’s second part concentrates on Patricia Highsmith’s five Mr. Ripley novels (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), *Ripley’s Game* (1974), *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980), and *Ripley Under Water* (1991)). Tom Ripley serves as an exemplary figure which allows Schwanebeck to investigate

imposture from a gender-focused perspective and to draw general conclusions about masculinity and narrative identity. Schwanebeck traces a development of the impostor theme and figure as well as conceptions of masculinity in the sequel. While in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Highsmith transfers the topic of imposture from its traditional place in the picaresque comedy to that of the subversive thriller, in *Ripley Under Ground* the impostor's scheming and crimes are stylized as works of art. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in Schwanebeck's reading still adheres to a viable authenticity whereas the 1970 sequel plays with poststructuralist thought and ideas of simulacra. In *Ripley's Game* and *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* this tendency is exacerbated. Highsmith brings the impostor motif to the boil as Ripley more and more loses control of his con game. Furthermore, she deconstructs traditional roles of masculinity, such as the patriarchal father, by ludicrously exaggerating them and by showing them to be acts. Schwanebeck concludes that the imposture motif in Highsmith's work progressively shifts from a subject matter to a poetological method by creating a very specific narrative perspective: Instead of a homodiegetic narrator, as we find it, for instance, in most picaresque novels, Highsmith uses what Schwanebeck calls a barely recognizable manipulative focalization (139–159). Highsmith involves her readers in a con game because we never get all the information and have to infer more than we know. The character Ripley, as Schwanebeck convincingly argues, manipulates the narrative, not as a typical unreliable narrator, however, but through a cunning shift of external and internal focalization in Highsmith's work. Gender identity and homoerotic desire are deliberately obfuscated by a camouflage which extinguishes the traces of narrative. Imposture or deceit, he argues, lie in the narrative itself which emulates techniques of disguise, pretense, and camouflage and eventually renders the unease inherent in any discourses of masculinity. We have to tell a credible story of who we are to be recognized as somebody in the world. Such narrative constructions inevitably rely on cultural topoi and set narrative elements so that male imposture and masculine identity are often closely allied.

The book at hand is a revised PhD thesis – with all the vices and virtues of its kind. At times, the theory is overbearing and the examples too detailed, especially because the analytical part devotes one chapter to each Mr. Ripley novel (except for the last one) where a tightening of the argument sometimes would have been desirable. Nonetheless this is a sound, and what is more, extremely well-written study which combines a high level of theoretical reflection with a very agreeable writing style. It matters to anyone interested in forms and functions of imposture in American literature, culture, and film as well as to anyone wanting to learn about constructions of masculinity and their connection to narrative. Last but not least, the book is a highly recommendable read for anyone curious about the outline and inner workings of Patricia Highsmith's Ripley games.