

# CONSTRUCTING BODIES: SCIENCE, GENDER, AND RACE

## ‘Do You Measure Up?:’ The Making of Male Perfection, 1850-1915

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In “The Embodiment of Masculinity: Cultural, Psychological, and Behavioral Dimensions” (1986) Marc Mishkind and others pointed out that whereas a considerable amount of scholarship has now addressed issues pertaining to the physical appearance of women, studies of masculinity have ignored the body. With few exceptions, this is still true. In an article devoted to the prolific scholar Sander Gilman, the November 10, 1993 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* pointed to his recently published *The Jew’s Body* (1991) and Freud, *Race, and Gender* (1993). Anson Rabinbach’s *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and Modernity* (1990) examined late 19th and early 20th century attempts to systemize the investigation of human potential around topics like metabolism, neuromuscular fatigue, reaction-time, and similar “inner” workings of the body. John Hoberman’s *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (1992) extended such questions to include the influences of other biomedical issues embraced within field like pharmacology and the turn-of-the-century search for liqueur testiculaire as an aid--among other things--to improved athletic performance.

Intense interest was also expressed in the “outside” of the body. Not only did anthropometrists and physical educators like Dudley Allen Sargent take the girths of chests, biceps, and other body parts of thousands of young men; the *New York Journal and Advertiser* and other periodicals published height and weight charts of footballers dressed in full regalia. In 1897, the Providence Sunday Telegram featured a sketch (and pertinent measurements) of the Bowdoin student who had just won the “intercollegiate strength tests.” For many, such muscular, athletic men set the “gold standard” for what it was to be--quite literally--a man! Against this, women, Black males, and males of many “immigrant” populations were unfavorably compared. So were men who were judged not to “measure up”-

-the term was not inconsequential. Such men were not only “all nerves:” they were most likely cowardly, incompetent, and (perhaps worst of all) effeminate.

This paper explores the construction of the male body in Britain and America from 1850 to 1915 with particular reference to the metaphors and icons through which the general and specialized literature elaborated dominant themes.