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Research Article

"The Human Dress Is Forged Iron": (Re)imagining Postmodern Masculinity and Gendered Logic of Bureaucratic Desire in Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*

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Abstract

Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse* functions not merely as an absurdist drama but as a critical interrogation of institutional power, masculinity, and the biopolitical regulation of human life. This paper approaches the play through Connell's theory of masculinity and Butler's framework of gender performativity, supplemented by perspectives from affect theory and posthumanism. It argues that the institutional machinery of *The Hothouse* is sustained through two interrelated masculine modalities: the authoritative-affective (characters of Roote and Gibbs) and the complicit-instrumental (characters of Lush and Lamb). The first part of the analysis examines how erotic desire operates as a mechanism of control, where Roote's libidinal fixation and Gibbs' calculated manipulation reveal sexuality as constitutive of bureaucratic authority rather than incidental to it. The second part turns to the dehumanization of subordinate figures such as Lamb and Lush, whose reduction to expendable bodies reflects a process of posthuman subjectivation within a biopolitical system that governs through surveillance, experimentation, and erasure. The paper aims to demonstrate how Pinter exposes masculinity as a performative and contingent construct, in which dominance, desire, and dehumanization converge, revealing both the pathology of individuals and the violence embedded within institutional structures.

Keywords

Biopolitical, Connell, Masculinity, Posthuman, Sexuality

1. Introduction

Masculinity has never been a stable category. It is a restless performance, one that feeds upon its own insecurities to sustain the illusion of power. As Connell famously proposed, "Masculinity is not a fixed character type, always the same anywhere; it is, rather, a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations" (Connell 71). The instability Connell identifies is both sociological and existential—it compels men to constantly rehearse authority, often through violence, repression, and competition. In Harold Pinter's The Hothouse, this instability becomes a theatrical event. The men of The

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Hothouse—Roote, Gibbs, Lush, and Lamb—exist within a claustrophobic ecosystem where power is both eroticized and bureaucratic. Michael Kimmel defines this anxiety as the "flight from the feminine," arguing that "Masculinity must be constantly demonstrated, and no sooner is it proved than it is again in question" (Kimmel 3).

This crisis of performance intersects crucially with sexuality. In Pinter's play, sexual desire is never pure or liberatory—it is a means of governance, a coded exchange of power. bell hooks clarifies this dynamic when she writes that patriarchal structures condition men to suppress their emotional capacities, ensuring that emotional numbness becomes a mechanism through which dominance is sustained and rarely questioned (hooks 27). Roote's obsession with Miss Cutts is not affection but an assertion of ownership, while Gibbs's cold, managerial detachment converts erotic energy into bureaucratic control. Both men exemplify how patriarchal masculinity transforms sexuality into hierarchy. Desire becomes not a site of intimacy but a currency of power—administered, monitored, and weaponized.

Characters like Lamb and Lush occupy the margins of this hierarchy, functioning as subjects of institutional experimentation. Pinter anticipates a posthuman critique of masculinity—the reduction of the human subject to an administrative category, an object of control. As Rosi Braidotti contends, "Posthuman subjectivity is not about the death of the human, but about a shift from possessive individualism to distributed agency" (Braidotti 49). This "distributed agency" collapses into absurdity: men are not agents of power but extensions of it, dehumanized by the very system they serve. Such anxieties are not confined to Pinter's institution but reflect the broader postmodern crisis of male identity. Raewyn Connell notes that "hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities as well as to women" (Connell 183). Pinter dramatizes this hierarchy within the male domain itself—where subordinates internalize the violence of superiors, reproducing the same mechanisms of oppression that bind them. The result is a closed circuit of aggression, an echo chamber of masculine failure that mirrors the absurd bureaucracy of modern power.

2. Methods

This study follows a qualitative and interpretive research methodology to analyze *The Hothouse*. The research is primarily based on close textual reading and the application of relevant theoretical frameworks to understand how masculinity, power, and desire function within the play.

The first step of the methodology involves a detailed textual analysis of the primary text. Key scenes, dialogues, and character interactions are closely examined to identify patterns of authority, control, and gender performance. Special attention is given to the language used by characters, as it reflects the workings of institutional power and the construction of masculine identity.

The study is guided by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. It draws on R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine how dominant and subordinate masculine roles are structured within the institution. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is used to understand masculinity as a repeated performance rather than a fixed identity. The concept of biopower developed by Michel Foucault helps explain how institutions regulate bodies and control human behavior. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the study draws on the ideas of Jacques Lacan to explore how subjectivity is shaped through language, authority, and symbolic structures. Concepts such as the instability of identity and the dependence on external validation help explain the fragile masculinity of characters like Roote. The research also incorporates ideas from posthumanism, particularly from Rosi Braidotti, to explore how characters in the play are transformed into objects within a system of control. The research also engages with postmodern theory, particularly through thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard. Postmodernism helps in understanding the collapse of stable identities and the idea that power often exists as simulation rather than reality. In *The Hothouse*, authority appears performative and repetitive rather than authentic, reflecting the postmodern condition where meaning and identity are constantly shifting.

The conceptual framework is guided by three main analytical objectives: To examine how masculinity operates as a biopolitical function within institutional systems, to analyze how desire becomes regulated and controlled by bureaucratic structures and to explore the transition from the human subject to a posthuman object, where individuals are reduced to functional roles within a system.

3. Result and Discussion

Roote and Gibbs: Bureaucratic Masculinity and the Erotics of Order

Pinter employs 'iron' as a unifying metaphor for masculine rigidity and eventual fracture. Both Roote and Gibbs are embodiments of iron masculinities—structured, unyielding, and ultimately self-consuming. The asylum itself, constructed with iron logic, reflects order without empathy, discipline without purpose. This metaphor illustrates Connell's notion that hegemonic masculinity operates through social institutions, shaping expectations while simultaneously constraining its subjects (Connell 195).

Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics further illuminates the transformation of masculinity in The Hothouse, emphasizing the "intensification of control and automation of the flesh"

within late capitalist structures (Braidotti 56). Roote's patriarchal collapse and Gibbs's procedural precision reflect posthuman mutations: subjects detached from their embodied humanity, performing social roles as functions rather than as humans. Desire, instead of being annihilated, is repurposed into hierarchical control and the eroticism of authority. Iron, therefore, signifies both strength and paralysis. Pinter's men are custodians of order rather than agents of vitality, forging masculinity into a functional but ultimately hollow structure. Baudrillard captures this simulation of authority: "Power itself no longer believes in power; it only survives by simulation" (Baudrillard 19). The masculine subject, like the institution, becomes a simulacrum—a form without true force or vitality.

Roote's masculinity is fragile, theatrical, and performative. As the director of the asylum, his authority depends on linguistic dominance and procedural discipline, reflecting Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity not as a fixed identity but as a "configuration of gender practice" through which patriarchal power is rendered socially acceptable and repeatedly legitimized (Connell 77), highlighting how social norms sustain male dominance within a given cultural context.

Pinter situates Roote's failure within the broader crisis of patriarchal sovereignty, in which the masculine subject is dependent on maintaining ignorance of institutional corruption and unacknowledged crimes. The asylum mirrors his mind: labyrinthine, claustrophobic, and haunted by unresolved guilt. This is made textually clear by his immediate, paranoid reaction to his subordinate, Gibbs: "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, creeping up behind me like a snake!" (Pinter 65). The fear of the encroaching subordinate undermines his directorial image and highlights his psychological fragility. In Foucault's account of disciplinary power, authority does not function as a stable possession; instead, it is "exercised" through networks of "strategic positions" whose cumulative effects sustain domination without locating power in a single class or subject (Foucault 26). Roote's masculinity is thus contingent on performance, relying on the very institutional scripts that simultaneously mock him. His administrative control is entirely nominal; when confronted with the death of patient 6457, he can only stutter: "I'm damn sure there's a discrepancy! You come and tell me that a man has died and I've got it down here that I had a conversation with him yesterday morning," and later admits, "I can't remember a damn thing about him. What did he look like?" Judith Butler's concept of "the melancholy of gender identification" is particularly relevant here: the psychic cost of performing gender norms that one cannot fully inhabit manifests in Roote's repeated, hollow gestures (Butler 91). His desperate attempt to impose Order illustrates this melancholia. Roote's faltering authority can be further understood through Lacan's concept of the Name-of-the-Father, the symbolic signifier that legitimizes law, order, and masculine identity. As Dr. Mandal explains in *Jacques Lacan: From Clinic to Culture*(2018), "What is foreclosed in psychosis, says Lacan, is the 'Name-of-the-Father'. The 'Name-of-the-Father' is understood primarily as the first signifier that the child has access to (the 'no' and the 'name' of the father), as the primary signifier which names and positions the subject in the symbolic order and as the signifier of law, logic and language that constitute social reality."(Mandal 36) Roote's repeated invocation of his predecessor—"As my predecessor said, on one unforgettable occasion…"—reveals his dependence on this vanished paternal signifier to stabilize his authority. Yet what he reproduces is not power but its echo; the Name-of-the-Father here survives only as parody. The foreclosure of this signifier, as Lacan notes, results in the collapse of meaning and the return of chaos.

The implied sexual violation of a female patient by Roote reveals how desire in the asylum is mediated through aggression and institutional control. Sara Ahmed notes that "the economy of heterosexual desire in institutions of power is sustained by its disavowal" (Ahmed 141). Roote's sexualized aggression is symptomatic of his broader masculine dysfunction: it is not an excess but a reflection of the erotic investment in domination. His masculinity, reduced to administrative gestures, prioritizes control over genuine human engagement, especially when discussing the patient's pregnancy: "But we all know the rule! Never ride barebacked. Always take precautions" (Pinter 45). It demonstrates how bureaucratic language masks and facilitates cruelty. This breakdown exemplifies the postmodern erosion of the patriarchal figure. Lyotard describes postmodernity as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard. xxiv), and Roote's collapse mirrors the disintegration patriarchal narratives of authority, reason, and care. His masculinity becomes an echo of the past, loud but hollow, highlighting the instability of hegemonic structures when confronted with modernity's skepticism.

While Roote represents a collapsing patriarch, Gibbs embodies the evolution of masculinity toward bureaucratic, technocratic control. Gibbs's calm precision, affective detachment, and reliance on linguistic regulation illustrate the postmodern administrative subject. Where Roote relies on emotional outbursts and paternal gestures, Gibbs's power derives from systematic surveillance, procedural mastery, and the manipulation of information. His masculinity exemplifies what Connell frames as subordinated masculinity that simultaneously consolidates hegemonic authority through alternative modalities.

Gibbs's authority emerges from control over documentation and procedures, reflecting Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity: a form of social organization in which power circulates through protocols, routines, and ephemeral networks rather than through stable moral or patriarchal codes (Bauman 15). Gibbs's masculinity is textual and managerial rather than embodied, finding its erotic charge in the precision of language, the manipulation of reports, and the orchestration of order. In Pinter's text, bureaucracy itself becomes an erotic

of masculinity: mastery of the system substitutes for mastery of bodies or relationships. Gibbs asserts his mastery instantly by controlling the narrative of events, coolly correcting Roote with, "I supervised the burial arrangements myself, sir," and, "I meant… about the dates, sir." His power is cemented through surveillance, which he subtly announces to Roote: "I do try to keep my powers of observation well exercised, sir." This form of masculinity is toxic not in overt violence but in its systemic coldness. Gibbs's euphemistic language masks brutality; deaths and violations are reduced to "unfortunate incidents," reflecting a bureaucratic rationality that erases human consequences. This is chillingly evident during the preparation of Lamb for the coercive electroshock experiment. Gibbs casually describes the set-up with a chuckle: (with a chuckle) "Oh yes, got to be plugged in. The leads go right through the wall and up to the control room, you see." He follows this with a bizarre, cheerful reassurance: (Cheeringly) "Don't worry, they're nice long leads, all of them. Plenty of leeway. No danger of strangulation." The cheering tone juxtaposed against the possibility of strangulation demonstrates a pathology rooted in systemic, affective detachment. Lauren Berlant describes such situations as "cruel optimism," in which the pursuit of a desired object—here, institutional stability—obstructs genuine flourishing (Berlant 1). Gibbs's desire for control ultimately undermines the very humanity he is charged to preserve, demonstrating the pathological consequences of procedural masculinity. The interplay between Roote and Gibbs stages a succession of masculine archetypes: the irrational patriarch supplanted by the affectless administrator. Yet both operate within what Donna Haraway identifies as the "fantasy of mastery" (Harraway 118). Gibbs's calmness is not the absence of desire but its reconfiguration into administrative precision. The rivalry between the two characters carries an erotic undertone, revealing how desire in The Hothouse becomes inseparable from power dynamics. Gibbs's eventual assumption of authority does not bring resolution. In the final scene, he confirms his status as the sole survivor of the staff's slaughter with chilling detachment: "The whole staff was slaughtered, sir. / With one exception, of course. / Me, sir." He claims to have survived because he "was engaged on some research, sir, alone," positioning his isolation and administrative focus as his shield. His triumph is thus a systemic rather than personal victory, underscoring the disembodiment of postmodern masculinity.

Following Connell, hegemonic masculinity relies on structural legitimacy but simultaneously constrains those who enact it. Pinter dramatizes this tension through the collapse of patriarchal and bureaucratic authority, revealing masculinity as both a social and psychic performance. What survives after this collapse is not liberation but exhaustion: the human form replaced by iron, ritualized authority, and the rhythm of control itself. The play thus becomes an autopsy of postmodern masculinity, showing the consequences of mechanized desire and the failure of authority detached from ethical and human accountability.

Flesh Under Surveillance: Lamb, Lush, and the Posthuman Masculine

If Roote and Gibbs embody the iron of institutional masculinity—rigid, disciplinary, and performatively coherent—then Lamb and Lush expose its flesh, the vulnerable underside of a system that corrodes the masculine body from within. The dichotomy of iron and flesh transcends mere metaphor for strength and weakness; it signifies an ontological crisis: the masculine subject, once armored in authority, begins to collapse under the very mechanisms intended to fortify it. The masculine subject does not die heroically; it decays bureaucratically. As Lamb's body is consumed and Lush's voice is silenced by institutional violence, Pinter stages the ultimate irony: power no longer needs the human, yet the human cannot exist outside of power. Masculinity, stripped of its organic pulse, persists as what Braidotti terms "a process without a subject" (Braidotti 38). In the sterile corridors of The Hothouse, the human dress remains forged iron—cold, gleaming, and empty.

William Blake's description of the "human dress" as "forged iron" (Blake, 1794) invokes a paradox that Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse* dramatizes with surgical precision: the more masculinity strives to mechanize itself into invulnerability, the more it exposes its innate fragility. Within the bureaucratic asylum, the male body ceases to be a site of virility and transforms into an exhausted organ of surveillance, bruised by the relentless monotony of control. In this implosion of semantic meaning, where "the real no longer exists as such" (Baudrillard, 194), Pinter's men become mere simulations of power—iron shells containing no vital pulse. The result is a posthuman spectacle of masculinity dismembered, where flesh and iron are no longer opposites but interchangeable ruins. Yet this corrosion is not merely sociological—it is metaphysical. What corrodes is not only the institution, but Being itself as it is lived through masculine performance. Pinter's world is haunted by the question Heidegger raises: what does it mean to dwell in a system that no longer permits dwelling? The men of The Hothouse inhabit a space where control has replaced contemplation, and the ontological texture of existence has been hardened into procedural steel. Their humanity is not erased at once—it rusts, slowly, beneath the surface of authority. What remains are bodies and voices that circulate within the institutional apparatus, evacuated of individuality, replaying the empty gestures of command long after the logic of command has vanished. As Baudrillard observes, "Power is no longer present except in its simulacrum" (Baudrillard 28). *The Hothouse*, in this sense, functions as a microcosm of simulacral masculinity—men performing a gendered identity that has already lost its genuine referent. But in this circularity of performance and paralysis, one glimpses an even deeper

absurdity: masculinity persists only as its own echo. The men of Pinter's asylum no longer inhabit the role of rulers but of echoes—each word of command is a reverberation from an absent centre. The iron structure has become a hall of mirrors.

Lamb stands at the epicentre of this systemic implosion, embodying a form of Subordinated Masculinity that is pathologized and ultimately consumed by the hegemonic structure. His trajectory is marked by a fatal evolution from naïve aspirant to total, confused assimilation, illustrating the institution's capacity to internalize and neutralize its own subjects.

Lamb's initial engagement with the institution is characterized by a disturbing naïve enthusiasm—a pre-emptive devotion to the bureaucratic cause that signals his vulnerability to manipulation. He views his potential role not as a responsibility, but as an undeserved honour. "I can't help thinking this is something to do with my promotion," he suggests, asking with an almost childish eagerness, "Do you think he's read my schemes?" (Pinter 59). This desire for administrative validation is compounded by a profound self-abnegation, where association with the facility is inherently sanctified: "You really get the feeling here that something… important is going on, something really valuable, and to be associated with it in any way can't be seen in any other light than as a privilege" (Pinter 60).This eagerness to assimilate underscores his status as the ideal disciplinary subject (Foucault 177), actively seeking the very structure that will ultimately subordinate him. This subordination begins with a fetishization of bureaucratic protocol. When the conversation turns to his employment, he declares himself "delighted" to participate in "Tests," adding, "That's what I hoped I'd be doing when I first came down here" (Pinter 63). His subsequent, fascinated observation, "Oh, you've… got to be plugged in, have you?" (Pinter 65), marks his casual acceptance of the body as a technological interface—a machine component.

What Pinter accomplishes through Lamb is almost phenomenological: the reduction of man to the function of his submission. Heidegger would call this the "enframing" (Gestell) of the human being into the logic of the machine. Lamb does not merely follow orders—he internalizes the metaphysics of order. He desires to become instrumental.

Lamb embodies what Butler calls the "failure of performativity" (Butler 141), where the gendered self-collapses under ritualistic repetition stripped of intent. His participation in the bizarre psychological "tests" is characterized by total submission and confused honesty, confirming his descent into Subordinated Masculinity. When asked if he belongs to a "subversive group," he replies with bureaucratic solemnity, "Well, I am a member of such a group, here, in this establishment" (Pinter 77). His response to the bizarre, violating query, "Are you virgo intacta?"—"Yes, I am, actually. I'll make no secret of it" (Pinter 74)—is a grotesque assertion of purity framed within a context of sexual violation and institutional scrutiny. By the end of the interrogation, his anxiety has dissolved into a terrifying placidity: "Any more questions? I'm quite ready for another question. I'm rather enjoying this, you know" (Pinter 78). This is the final stage of his transition into the posthuman subject: the body and mind have been fully co-opted, finding pleasure not in autonomy, but in the seamless function of the torture. Lamb's masculinity is ultimately annihilated, reduced to an input/output mechanism by the hegemonic system that actively subordinates and consumes its weak links. The most chilling question Pinter raises through Lamb Is ontological: when submission becomes the very condition of being, is there any subject left to resist? Lamb's pleasure in his own dissolution suggests not moral failure, but metaphysical exhaustion—the collapse of the self into the logic of the system.

If Lamb represents the body consumed by the system, Lush is the corrosive cynic—the man who attempts to survive the bureaucratic system by weaponizing irony, perfectly embodying Complicit Masculinity (Connell, 1995). Lush sustains a semblance of agency by affirming the hegemonic status of Roote and Gibbs without having to enact it himself, enabling his survival through verbal subterfuge. Lush's primary survival mechanism is cynical flattery, which functions as a thinly veiled critique of Roote's performative authority. His excessive praise of Roote's supposed intellectual breadth is a masterpiece of mocking obsequiousness: "I mean, not only are you a scientist, but you have literary ability, musical ability, knowledge of most schools of philosophy, philology, photography, anthropology, cosmology, theology, phytology, phytonomy, phytotomy—" (Pinter 87–88).

The ridiculous piling up of obscure "ologies" serves to expose Roote's fundamental lack of real competence, humiliating the commander while simultaneously satisfying the formal demands of his Hegemonic Masculinity. This irony progresses from flattery to subtle rebellion through black humour. Lush is the passive chronicler of the institution's moral and physical entropy. His repetition of the line, "The snow has turned to slush" (Pinter 102), operates as a dry refrain, commenting on the decay. He mocks Roote's complicity in the death of Patient 6457 by linking it to administrative absurdity: "But perhaps I'm thinking of 6457," he muses (Pinter 90). The culmination of this morbid humour is the chilling joke that equates a deceased patient with a holiday garnish: "It's a dead duck, sir," he confirms of a Christmas prize, adding, "Yes, as dead as patient 6457. If not deader" (Pinter, 104–105). Lush's humour here maintains his complicit position, masking institutional horror behind professional detachment.

The fragile nature of complicity is revealed when Lush steps outside the bounds of ironic submission and attempts direct defiance. When he dares to confront Roote's hypocrisy with a direct rhetorical challenge— "A delegate of what? You can't explain yourself" (Pinter 131–132)—he is physically beaten down. This confrontation confirms that while the masculine subject can resist through verbal irony, direct challenge

will be literally crushed by patriarchal force. Even after the assault, his masculinity reverts to a servile pacification: "He was only having a little joke, Gibbs old man" (Pinter 135). Lush's final act—offering Roote a "Christmas present" (Pinter 137), an exploding cigar—is his only physical resistance. His complicity breaks down under pressure, resulting in violent subordination, echoing Lamb's ultimate fate.

Between Lamb's total submission and Lush's self-defeating cynicism lies the play's most unsettling revelation: desire itself collapses under the bureaucratic regime. The erotic energy that once fueled Roote's or Gibbs's aggression is now fully absorbed into procedural logic, resulting in bureaucratic desire and a craving for regulation rather than connection. Masculinity has lost its grand narrative, and in its place emerges an ironic self-awareness: men desiring the very systems that annihilate them. As Foucault suggests, "Power and pleasure are not opposites… they provoke one another" (Foucault 45). Pinter's men circulate within the machine of their own discipline, deriving gratification from the mere repetition of control. The men are trapped in a closed system where their power feeds on itself until nothing remains but an echo. This entropy recalls Baudrillard's notion of "implosion" (Baudrillard 82). Lamb's consumption and Lush's exhausted irony are complementary expressions of the same systemic condition. Both are trapped in what Ahmed calls the "affective economy of institutions," where emotions circulate as power relations rather than personal expressions (Ahmed 119).

4. Conclusion

Masculinity ultimately collapses under the pressure of its own design. What begins as a contest for authority within a bureaucratic asylum gradually mutates into a spectacle of self-erosion, where the pursuit of control reveals a distinctly mechanical fragility. As Judith Butler suggests, gender functions through repetitive acts of "imitation" without any authentic origin, sustained only by continual performance rather than essence (Butler 25). In The Hothouse, this logic becomes pathological. Roote and Gibbs enact authority as a compulsive ritual; their masculinity survives as performance long after its center has vanished. Power persists not because it is grounded, but because it is endlessly rehearsed.

The psychic cost of this performance is clarified by Bell Hooks's argument that patriarchy requires men to undergo forms of "psychic self-mutilation" in order to secure dominance (hooks 66). Pinter's men exemplify this internal violence. Emotional detachment becomes a professional requirement, empathy a liability. In excising feeling to maintain bureaucratic order, they preserve control at the expense of their own interior lives. Masculine authority, in this sense, is sustained through self-inflicted emotional deprivation rather than genuine strength.

Yet *The Hothouse* does more than expose the failures of traditional masculinity; it anticipates a reconfiguration of masculine subjectivity itself—what may be termed mechanical masculinity. This figure is no longer organized around autonomy or mastery but recalibrated by institutional logic, operating through automated gestures, speech, and desire. Pinter's vision resonates with Rosi Braidotti's account of the posthuman condition, in which "the human" ceases to be "the measure of all things" and instead becomes embedded within a network of forces and relations (Braidotti 190). Masculinity here no longer functions as identity; it operates as infrastructure, a programmed reflex that allows the system to sustain itself. The men are not sovereign agents of power; they are its extensions, disciplined and dehumanized by the very bureaucratic machinery they enforce. *The Hothouse* closes without redemption, revealing that toxic masculinity is less the flaw of individual men than the inevitable outcome of a system that produces masculine subjects designed to "perform," exhaust, and collapse

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