

MANHOOD AND MASCULINITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Abstract

This article provides an overview of some key developments in the historiography of manhood and masculinity in early modern England in the last decade, focusing in particular on how ideals of manhood and masculinity were shaped by ideas about the body and sexuality, as well as experiences and practices of fatherhood, sociability and politics in England between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth century. The article argues that the history of manhood and masculinity is a vibrant area, but that some questions relating to manhood and masculinity remain underexplored, especially in relation to politics. It also questions whether enough effort has been taken to consider the seventeenth century as a whole, with much work on the history of manhood and masculinity continuing to focus on the periods before 1640 or after 1660, reiterating earlier calls for more attention to be paid to thinking about continuities and changes in manhood and masculinity across the early modern period in England.

Introduction

Historians of early modern England first became interested in masculinity in the mid-1980s, and over the following twenty years the field expanded to encompass topics including patriarchy and marital relations; crime and violence; religion and popular culture; and civility and honour.¹ In 2005 Alexandra Shepard and Karen Harvey surveyed this literature and argued that, although different models of masculinity existed and dominated at particular moments, there was significant continuity in the ideals to which men aspired as gendered subjects between 1500 and 1800. Any sense of drastic shifts had as much to do with methodological differences between historians as with actual alterations during the period, with those studying the century and a half before 1640 and the decades after 1780 focusing on the social history of middling-sort men in the domestic sphere, whilst scholarship on the century after 1660 tending to centre on the roles of aristocratic and genteel men in the public sphere. Shepard and Harvey proposed that historians of early modern masculinity needed to do more to combine the methodologies of social and cultural history, and bemoaned the failure of the existing scholarship to engage with religion and politics, in particular how the impact of war affected male experiences and identities.² What follows outlines some of the main advances in four major areas of the historiography of masculinity in England since the publication of these important articles, focusing on the period from 1550 to 1750. During the last decade there have been significant advances in understandings of certain topics, with many junior academics making important contributions, but some themes remain in need of further investigation, and the issues related to chronology and methodology raised by Shepard and Harvey have been addressed by to only a limited extent.

Bodies

During the last decade social and cultural historians of masculinity have developed an increasing interest in bodies, focusing on issues of presentation and self-mastery. Jennifer Jordan has argued that hair was a particular signifier of masculinity. In the first half of the seventeenth century beards acted as markers of full manhood and long hair was popular, but also subject to condemnation by moralists, with men who permed and powdered their hair accused of effeminate vanity. After 1660 the popularity of beards declined, coinciding with the vogue for wigs, fashionable commodities which signified wealth and status, but which also served practical purposes such as improving hygiene and enabling the wearer to disguise greying hair or baldness.³ Understandings of baldness related to age, health, and physical attractiveness, and Anu Korhonen has argued that men coped with their

baldness by realising its comic potential, turning it into a joke or using it as a prop in a jest. Baldness was regarded as signifying the gradual decline rather than the complete loss of manliness, and although regarded as a masculine condition, it was a trait that no man aspired to.⁴ By shifting attention from the victims to the perpetrators recent scholarship on rape has emphasised issues of self-control too. Garthine Walker has argued that rapists were imagined as men who were unable to control their lusts or who experienced frustrated passions, with those who engaged in gang and serial rape, homosexual intercourse, incest and sex with children under the age of twelve viewed as lacking in reason and sensibility.⁵ Those who raped children were regarded as subject to uncontrollable lust rather than abnormal sexual desire, and Sarah Toulalan has argued that such men were accused of other failings, including drunkenness, idleness, vanity, anger, and keeping bad company.⁶ **Such findings reveal how histories of bodies and emotions are intertwined, as has a recent article in which Bernard Capp posed the question of whether or not it was acceptable for men to shed tears. Humanist codes of civility suggested that shedding tears was a sign of effeminacy and rusticity, but disapproval of men crying was never absolute. Weeping out of fear or due to laughter was frowned upon, but tears of joy, relief or grief were acceptable when shed moderately and in private, as were public tears of repentance. Religious tears prompted by fervent prayer were shed by many puritans and non-conformists, but became less acceptable in the later seventeenth century, regarded with cynicism or contempt in an increasingly militarised and combative society, a mood which was to prevail under the rise of sentimentality in the mid eighteenth century.**⁷

Historians of medicine have taken an interest in the male body too, and this scholarship has also foregrounded issues of self-mastery. The desire to differentiate between the open female body and closed male body appears to have grown during the early modern period, and Lisa Smith has argued that by 1700 a pathological discourse was developing which emphasised the importance of men controlling their bodies and minds to ensure they maintained their health and gender identity. Uncontrolled, flowing male bodies threatened to destabilise social order by undermining men's claims to power. An unbounded male body was not considered normal or healthy, and many flows had moral causes attributed to them.⁸ Jennifer Evans has tracked changing ideas about the gendered body too, arguing that across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries female barrenness came to be distinguished from male impotence, the latter being associated with weak seed and premature ejaculation, although many remedies for infertility were regarded as effectual for both sexes in terms of raising heat, providing moisture, and increasing the quantity of seed in the body.⁹

Fatherhood

Issues of fertility and sexuality have been central not only to the historiography of medicine and the body, but also to the growing literature on fatherhood. Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster have highlighted how inability to conceive caused anxiety amongst married couples, especially those from the upper ranks of society, with the failure to produce male children being a particular cause for concern. Married couples who deliberately sought to avoid having children were condemned, and marriages were annulled on the grounds of impotence. A man was held responsible for infertility if he failed to achieve an erection; was unable to penetrate the woman; if he failed to produce semen of sufficient quantity or quality; or if he was sexually or emotionally incompatible with his wife, and male infertility raised broader questions about self-mastery, such as whether a man was fit to hold public office and whether he was economically as well as sexually incapacitated. Couples who were unable to conceive might take comfort from preachers who placed greater emphasis on the importance of companionship rather than reproduction within marriage, and whilst impotency and

barrenness were subjects of satirical mockery in print, amongst the mass of the population being afflicted with such a condition was regarded as a misfortune rather than a disaster.¹⁰

Evans, Berry and Foyster focused on biological fatherhood, but others have examined the social aspects of the role. Anthony Fletcher has argued that amongst the seventeenth-century gentry most fathers were benign patriarchs, working to ensure deference and obedience from their children, but also displaying real love and affection for them, and with the impact of sensibility and romanticism the tone and emotional content of fatherhood softened further after 1750.¹¹ Fathers played a key role in the education of their children, and took pride in their achievements. Ideas of what it meant to be a man were conveyed through the male line, and Jennifer Jordan has argued that boys learned of the qualities associated with self-mastery not only through conduct book, but also by reading or hearing accounts of the actions of fathers and grandfathers. Fathers had close relationships to the bodies of their sons too, describing their physical appearance, purchasing clothes for, recording their accidents and mishaps, and tending them when they became ill.¹² **Hannah Newton has argued that although nursing was usually provided by mothers, something which children often wanted, many fathers were involved in the process too. Fathers did not regard such duties of care as effeminising, not least because knowledge of medicine was a marker of gentlemanly esteem, and some argued that masculine attributes of courage and rationality were required to treat particularly distressing or dangerous illnesses.**¹³

Whilst Fletcher, Jordan and Newton have focused on domestic relationships between fathers and sons, Henry French and Mark Rothery have examined the impact of such relationships on the public image of fathers, showing how fatherhood augmented and enhanced masculine qualities of leadership and judgement, but also risked undermining male authority and power. The behaviour of children was a reflection on the values or capabilities of a man, and fatherhood limited patriarchal power since a chief responsibility of fathers was to ensure adequate financial provision for future generations. Fathers had to think dynastically, which in turn allowed them to inculcate notions of prudence, self-mastery and responsibility into their sons, as well as gentlemanly behaviour, respectability, responsibility and duty.¹⁴ Fletcher, Jordan, French and Rothery focused on the gentry, but Karen Harvey has noted similar priorities amongst the middling sorts, where a key element of being a good father was the transmission of knowledge of domestic economy to sons through the creation and enhancement of manuscript account books, as well as the bequeathing of printed volumes on household management. These receptacles of knowledge enabled men to manage servants and engage in business and commerce, but also functioned as family annals, enabling patriarchs to create and perpetuate family lineages. Fathers took an interest in their sons' marriages as financial partnerships, and sought to educate them in financial probity, cultivating what Harvey refers to as a form of 'commercial masculinity'. Financial matters were at the heart of much correspondence between fathers and sons, with many of the latter remaining reliant on the former well into adulthood, creating potentially tense intergenerational relations.¹⁵

Amongst the labouring poor fatherhood was very different, especially for men who fathered children outside wedlock. Patricia Crawford painted a negative picture of the fathers of illegitimate children, arguing that few accepted even the minimal duty of maintenance, with many either coercing the mother to abort the foetus, assisting in infanticide once the child was born, abandoning the infant, or fleeing their responsibilities, sometimes with the assistance of family and kin. Whilst acknowledging that some men were willing to marry single mothers and to become stepfathers to illegitimate children, Crawford observed that

when pressure was applied to men to marry the mothers of their children, some refused to do so, stating that they wished to marry chaste women or wanted nothing to do with family life.¹⁶ Whilst not denying that some fathers of illegitimate children were heartless and irresponsible, Alexandra Shepard has modified Crawford's findings, emphasising the willingness of at least some fathers to take responsibility for and to be involved in the lives of their children, noting that the ability of men to act as fathers was related to their wealth, age and marital status, and that the inability to provide for a child might cause the link between biological paternity and fatherhood as a social category to be severed.¹⁷

Commensality

As well as contributing to the historiography on fatherhood, Shepard has drawn attention to how the rituals and recreational activities associated with drinking were capable of uniting men by endorsing notions of bravura, strength, fraternity, comradeship, neighbourliness and good fellowship. Drinking together offered men a means to broker credit, seal agreements or patch up quarrels, but a balance needed to be struck, and excessive alcohol consumption was condemned not only for the damage it might do to the mind and the body of the drinker, but also because drunkenness risked undermining hierarchical and patrilineal relations founded on social status, age and marital status.¹⁸ Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin has built on Shepard's work to show how contributions to and attendance at guild dinners and feasts during the ritual year were an essential element of guild membership and of upholding personal status as a man of authority. Consumption of alcohol and food was expected to occur within strictly prescribed material and spatial contexts, and where and on what one sat as well as from what objects one consumed food and drink grew in importance from the later sixteenth century as guilds grew in size and communal feasting became a practical impossibility.¹⁹ Shepard and Kilburn-Toppin have focused on the century prior to 1640, but commensality retained its importance into the eighteenth century. Karen Harvey has analysed punch parties in eighteenth-century England, arguing that although such gatherings brought together men who lived in different locations and who might be divided by manners and political outlook, the attendees at such gatherings, as well as the drink they consumed, were middle-ranking in status. The objects from which men consumed punch were often decorated with images or lettering pertaining to guilds, clubs, companies, the navy or militia, and included images of men drinking. Punch was consumed in various public and private settings, and although punch parties were free-flowing and rowdy they were nonetheless organised and legitimate forms of male sociability, expressive of what Harvey considers to be a new kind of eighteenth-century patriarchy.²⁰

Politics

The topic of politics remains an under-explored aspect of the history of masculinity, but there have been important studies produced in the last decade. Exploring politics at a theoretical level, Cynthia Herrup has produced a broad survey analysing the multiple gender identities within Tudor and Stuart monarchy in order to explore the dynamics of governance. Rulers inhabited an artificial body that was gendered both male and female, and to rule well required traits associated with both female and male rulers. Monarchs of both sexes were expected to be unyielding and tender, economical and bountiful with words, courageous and peace loving, and to nurture their subjects. Balancing both masculine and feminine qualities was thus essential to maintaining a well-ordered kingdom, but the ideal ruler was one who displayed the masculine quality of self-control in order to avoid being infected with effeminacy and allowing government to lapse into a state of womanish tyranny.²¹

Other historians of masculinity and politics have chosen to examine shorter periods, and to focus on particular groups of men. Focusing on the period from 1580 to 1630, Richard Cust has noted the rise to prominence of 'public men' who used the language of stoicism to fashion themselves as 'honest patriots' and 'simple men of the country' who stood as political outsiders in contrast to the 'men of business' and 'parliament men' of Whitehall and Westminster. Such 'public men' sought to possess the cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance and fortitude and claimed to desire the liberty and security of their country and the destruction of greed, pride, covetousness and idleness. Calvinist ministers added an extra layer to the model by emphasising that public service was a godly vocation, and men's failure to fulfil their public duties by combatting sin and popery was liable to lead to the incitement of God's providential wrath. Such ideals permeated the genteel and middling ranks of English society and played a major role in casting the ideal representatives of local society as those who stood in opposition to the political centre.²² David Lawrence also stresses the importance of localism in constructing masculine political identities, argued that participation in civic militias offered a means for company men to distinguish themselves from civilians through their dress and the right to bear arms; by participating in local government and reaping the benefits of camaraderie; and by enabling them to enhance their status and authority in the eyes of cohabitants, visitors and inhabitants of nearby towns. Through public performances such as training drills and the enactment of mock battles, company members were able to display their honour, military prowess, order and discipline, fraternity, self-sacrifice, and commitment to the common good.²³ The centrality of military prowess to men as political agents is also key to the work of Peter Sherlock, who has discussed how monuments erected in Westminster Abbey were used to display nationalistic ideas, images and practices about elite male violence. Such tombs established the subject's rank in the feudal system or his role in royal service, depicting the deceased wearing armour and including epitaphs recounting their participation in battle in order to emphasise their aristocratic honour and youthful physicality.²⁴

Moving into the 1640s and 1650s, Ann Hughes has highlighted how ideas about manliness blurred the boundaries between public and private in political debates. Although restraint, magnanimity and rationality were praised as masculine traits which showed fitness for public service, discussions of how to be a public-spirited man also involved meditations on men's personal qualities and domestic lives. Dedication to families and households was a signifier of political honesty, but undue devotion to wife and family was a cause for concern at points of crisis, and men from both ends of the political spectrum stated that they were willing to put aside domestic concerns for the cause.²⁵ Hughes has also examined the problems and anxieties relating to contests over stereotypes and identities of manhood in the mid seventeenth century, a period when physical bravery, courage, chivalry and martial prowess gained renewed importance as manly qualities, although such attributes needed to be balanced with the need to maintain self-control, even in the heat of battle. Political principles and loyalties evoked contested ideals of manhood, and rivals denounced each other as inadequate, imperfect or effeminate men. Both sides desired their officers to be resolute and charismatic leaders and their men to be loyal, obedient and brave, and denounced their opponents by labelling them as drunkards or cuckolds. Mobilisation of the public during the war years involved inviting all men to become political actors, overriding restrictions of age, marital status and wealth, and bonds of brotherhood forged in war might cut across patriarchal and marital ties. The notion that full manhood ought to be based on being a patriarchal householder was undermined by the fact that promotion within the military depended on other factors, and by the debates on the franchise which took place at Putney.

As a result the conflicts of the mid-seventeenth century placed immense pressure on the pre-war ideals of hegemonic masculinity.²⁶

Conclusions

This survey of recent historiography on early modern manhood and masculinity has focused on some key areas of research during the last decade, **although other topics could have been discussed such as religion, witchcraft, and misogyny.**²⁷ Whilst issues relating to sexual acts and identities have remained key to discussions of the body, recent scholarship has begun to consider issues such as ageing, appearance, emotion and fashion too, broadening the scope of the topic. Pleasingly there is now a significant literature on fatherhood at all levels of English society, whilst sociability, particular with regards to consumption and commensality, is an emergent sub-field with the potential to link social and cultural histories with the study of economics and politics. The latter topic remains underexplored, with the decades from 1660 to 1688 a black hole as far as the study of political masculinities are concerned. **If there is a single issue which connects all four of these sub-fields, and which binds the historiography together, it is the repeated emphasis placed on how men strived to maintain self-control in order to prove their manliness.**

During the last decade many authors have responded to the criticisms of the field raised by Harvey and Shepard. Crawford, Fletcher, French and Rothery, and Harvey herself have written social histories of masculinity for the period after 1660, and there is some literature, albeit limited, on masculinity and politics. Yet whilst historians on both sides of the chronological divide have studied similar topics, not all have explored the period from 1600 to 1700 in its entirety. French and Rothery begin their study of genteel masculinities in 1660, and the earliest evidence Harvey draws on in her study of domestic men dates from 1665. All three argue for turning points in the eighteenth century (Harvey arguing for the 1740s and French and Rothery for the 1790s), but none of these scholars justify why the 1660s mark a useful starting point for the study of manhood and masculinity. Similarly, Crawford and Fletcher start their studies in 1580 and 1600 respectively, but neither pay any attention to continuities and changes between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. **By contrast, Evans, Newton and Capp, as well as Shepard in her work on gender and worth, have surveyed the whole of the period from the later sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, but have reached different conclusions about patterns of continuity and change, not least due to the different forms of evidence used by each historian.**²⁸ This scholarship reveals that conversations about chronologies in the history of masculinity remain ongoing, and will ensure that the field remains a lively area for debate for the foreseeable future.

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- ² Shepard, 'From anxious patriarchs to refined gentlemen?', 281-95; Harvey, 'The history of masculinity, circa 1650-1800', 296-311.
- ³ Jordan, "'That ere with age, his strength is utterly decay'd'", 27-48.
- ⁴ Korhonen, 'Strange things out of hair', 371-91.
- ⁵ Walker, 'Everyman or a monster?', 5-31.
- ⁶ Toulalan, "'Is he a licentious lewd sort of a person?'", 21-52.
- ⁷ Capp, 'Jesus wept, but did the Englishman?', 75-108.
- ⁸ Smith, 'The body embarrassed?', 26-46.
- ⁹ Evans, "'It is caused of the womans part or of the mans part'", 439-57.
- ¹⁰ Berry and Foyster, 'Childless men in early modern England', 158-83.
- ¹¹ Fletcher, *Growing up in England*, 129-32.
- ¹² Jordan, "'To make a man without reason'", 247-62.
- ¹³ Newton, *The sick child*, pp.101-10.
- ¹⁴ French and Rothery, *Man's estate*, 212-33.
- ¹⁵ Harvey, *The little republic*, 172-74, 177-82.
- ¹⁶ Crawford, *Parents of poor children*, 74-111.
- ¹⁷ Shepard, 'Brokering fatherhood', 41-64.
- ¹⁸ Shepard, "'Swil-bols and tos-pots'", 110-30.
- ¹⁹ Kilburn-Toppin, "'Discords have arisen and brotherly love decreased'", 28-38.
- ²⁰ Harvey, 'Ritual encounters', 165-203.
- ²¹ Herrup, 'The King's two genders', 493-510.
- ²² Cust, 'The "public man" in late Tudor and early Stuart England', 116-43.
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- ²⁷ Bell, 'The early Quakers', 283-300; Gaskill, 'Masculinity and witchcraft', 171-90; Kent, *Cases of male witchcraft*; Reinke-Williams, 'Misogyny, jest-books and male youth culture', 324-39; Stretton, 'Misogyny and male honour', 337-59.
- ²⁸ Shepard's forthcoming monograph, *Accounting for oneself*, will provide a full account of her findings.