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From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe

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The study of masculinity as a specific topic (rather than an implicit element) is not utterly new: work in sociology in the 1980s, cultural studies in the 1990s, and concerns of feminist criticism from much earlier have laid the foundations for studying how men set about being men. Historians have also engaged with the topic, most notably in work on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Medieval studies picked up the chase in the mid 1990s, initially in three separate volumes of essays devoted to the topic (1), and now in Ruth Mazo Karras's new book. *From Boys to Men* is the first single-authored volume devoted to the topic of medieval masculinity, and as such it has both a hard task to fulfil and a key role to play.

The book contains five chapters, the first and last acting as general introduction and overall conclusion. The three substantive chapters focus in turn on different groups of men: knights, university scholars, urban craft gildsmen. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, the broad intellectual context and the framework for the book. Drawing gently on some sociological and psychoanalytic works, Karras indicates some of the overarching questions relating to the study of masculinity ? its unitary or divided nature, its production through the passage from childhood to adulthood ? and also some of the particular complexities a medieval context brings to the discussion. For example, the fact that there was no mass media (arguments about sermons and preaching notwithstanding), no mass education system, and no 'ideology of equality' all suggest that modern theories of masculine identity formation cannot simply be transplanted from contemporary to medieval contexts.

To these three factors ? and as a key theme running through the book ? Karras adds the way in which patterns of social life provided a very different template from modernity for the transition to adulthood (and, it is implied, fully-formed masculine identity): work began at an early age, but did not imply maturity in other fields; age at marriage varied between aristocrats and ordinary folk, between men and women, and between northern and southern Europe. Didactic late-medieval literature on the 'Ages of Man' tended to assume that the sins, temptations and follies of 'youth' were present well into a man's twenties, and perhaps even thereafter. The possession of political, economic and social power (a key element in many modern theories of masculinity) was restricted to a very small medieval elite. Medieval life had a different shape from later societies; and hence masculinity must have worked differently. Chapter 1 sketches a few of these medieval features, for further exploration: that 'the subjection of women was always a part of masculinity, but not always its purpose or its central feature'; that 'the primary way by which a boy established his adult masculinity was by . proving himself against other men' (and women 'were often tools used in that demonstration'); and that the opposite of 'male' was not always necessarily 'female' but could be 'child' or 'beast' (p. 11).

Chapter 2 focuses upon knights, mainly using the literature of chivalry (manuals, and romances). Different facets of knightly masculinity are explored, including the training young knights received, and the structural role of aggression and violence in that education. It was a very male environment, and women were coded primarily as erotic objects rather than, say, family members. Also important were conduct (within the notional rules of chivalry), military prowess, and birth: 'In a sense, the young knight, by being born into the right family, had already proven himself against most other men' (p. 33). Perhaps most interesting (and following on from the work of others on homosociality) is a discussion of knightly display: the way in which male and female gazes, and male and female bodies, performed a complex pirouette intertwining different strands of desire (emulatory, erotic, self-regarding) at the tournament. Men performed their masculinity before the eyes of women. Men desired by women looked impressive to other men. Men performing before women felt part of a male group; but also saw themselves as participating in a game of individual prowess. And through that prowess, male beauty was prized and displayed, with 'a definite tinge of the erotic' (p. 49) ? by both sexes? However, Karras argues, the importance placed upon heterosexual desire was less (as others have argued) to assuage lurking anxiety about homosexuality and more about the importance of women as a 'currency' through which knightly success was measured (p. 51).

Chapter 3 turns our attention to a very different and contrasting realm: the medieval university. 'If the acquisition of masculinity in the European later Middle Ages was primarily a matter of proving oneself against others, nowhere was this more true than in the single-sex environment of the university'. As Karras points out, simply by being at university, a scholar had already 'proved himself not a woman; his task was now to use intellect to dominate other men' (p. 67). This process is investigated through an examination of university life, based largely upon university statutes, some court cases, and the *Manuale scholarium* (first published in Heidelberg in the 1480s), a text that presented aspects of university life ? possibly satirical ? through a dialogue between two students.

In this chapter, amongst other things, Karras provides us with a very useful overview of late medieval student activity, and the social workings of universities. Of key interest here was the place of women:

practically absent within the institution, with the university authorities discouraging contact as much as possible; but obviously present in the host town or city, where students might take their lodgings. Sadly, 'a main way in which students interacted with women of the town was through violence' ? rape was a very common crime (p. 77). Part of the blame here, Karras suggests, was the cultural environment of the university itself: women, as absent presences, were seen primarily as objects of sexual desire or (much the same thing) as the source of lustful sin. Furthermore, the intellectual environment, which also excluded women even as objects of (let alone subjects with) thoughts. In place of relationships other than sexual with the opposite sex, male students bonded with each other, through their shared and elite language, bizarre initiation rituals, and their drinking games (*plus ça change* .). Like knights, students could compete in (intellectual) combat, through disputations. Unlike knights, the 'Other' being rejected by students was as much animal as feminine; masculinity, for these men, was based upon 'the idea of rationality and moderation that distinguished the man both from the woman and from the beast' (p. 108).

In chapter 4, we change focus again, this time to the world of cities, merchants and gilds. Again, as with the men studied in the previous two chapters, masculinity was performed in part against women and in competition with other men. But in the world of the craft workshop, Karras argues, it was primarily about 'proving oneself not a boy' (p. 109). The achievement of manhood was tied up with social maturity and economic independence. Once more we are in a world (though a very much wider and more populous world than knighthood or scholarship) where boys were brought up to be men, pulled by various mechanisms of control whilst simultaneously pushed by various encouraged desires. Class was also a key factor: as it was difficult to marry without achieving a degree of economic success, young craftsmen could find themselves in an extended period of quasi-adolescence, bonding into gangs rather than forming families, and resentful of married men. 'Their dependence did not make them feminine, but they could not achieve full adult civic masculinity, so they might turn to other means, including violence, to demonstrate their manhood' (p. 110) ? and again we meet rape, often gang rape, as a means of asserting masculinity. But we also encounter less horrendous forms of empowerment: journeymen saddlers and tailors in London, for example, adopted their own livery for special occasions, much to the dismay of the craft masters. Drinking and feasting were semi-formalised: a Paris doubletmaker, for example, had to provide a drinking party for his co-workers when joining the trade.

Finally, in chapter 5, Karras provides some overview and conclusions. Modes of masculinity varied considerably according to the social milieu into which one was born. There were shared elements: all men considered by the book were 'training for a share in power . learning ways in which they could be unlike women . [and] competing against each other or their elders' (p. 151). But the marked differences were at least as important. Chivalric masculinity focussed upon proving manhood through prowess and violence, against the notional weakness of women. At the university, the man worked through moderation, intellect and control to prove himself not a beast. In the workshop a journeyman strove for economic independence and self-sufficiency, to cease to be a child, proved through marriage. Turning out from the specifics of her study, Karras notes that medieval misogyny did not function simply to oppress women: it was also about allowing men to impress or dominate other men through their control (literal or symbolic) of women. And, in contrast perhaps with modern ideas about masculinity, the concept of being a 'sturdy oak' standing alone and independent could have little purchase in the middle ages, because of the complexities of interdependence present in all walks of life: 'Total independence is a myth in most cultures, but it was a less important myth in the Middle Ages than in many others' (p. 166)

I suggested at the head of this review that *From Boys to Men* had a hard task and a key role to fulfil. The latter is its semi-foundational status: although a number of people have written about medieval masculinity before Karras, they have largely focussed upon a particular area of the puzzle, whereas this book attempts something of an overview. In that it is largely successful and thankfully written clearly and elegantly, such that one should be able to use it with students with great success. What may seem frustrating from one angle ? the lack of a very clear theoretical position in relation to topics such as subject formation, homosociality, self-consciousness of gender ? are, from a different perspective, a strength, as the book allows new readers to be introduced to various viewpoints upon the topic, whilst also providing existing scholars with many

thoughtful points to consider. The only major frustration in this respect is that the overview is not complete, as there is very little consideration of clerical masculinity or (perhaps more importantly and with broader implications) clerical *discourses* and masculinity. This may affect certain areas, such as the tensions set up by competing knightly and clerical textual communities within chivalric ideas of masculinity; or the pull that religious confraternity practices had upon craft gildsmen.

And of course this is a hard task, in a number of ways. As Karras notes at various points, there are particular problems regarding the available evidence ? not least that much of it was written by those otherwise largely absent clerics. By taking the key role of *From Boys to Men* as one of providing the *beginning* of a discussion, rather than its conclusion, perhaps we may be prompted into considering briefly some more of these hard tasks. First, the materials and sources. There is another question, not always addressed by the book, concerning the nature of the evidence: how do people relate to texts that present normative ideas? To what extent and in what ways do they read themselves into the text? This, of course, is a question not only for historians but also for sociologists, literary theorists and film scholars. But it is worth considering, and considering in its particularly *medieval* contexts. Can one read the shape of knightly masculinity in its lived experience from Arthurian romances, or does the role that a literature of fantasy played in presenting these impossibly perfect and impossibly flawed knights to its audience involve more complex questions about identification and reading practices? Second, fictions of self-identity. To what extent do the apparent 'realities' of social, economic and political power inform the theatre of masculinity (as Karras tends to suggest they do)? Or do men ? so often chasing power ? sometimes convince themselves that they possess it, even when outside commentators might demur? There is here, of course, also an element of considering the arenas of power, and the role of the household in providing a platform for masculine identity that (as early modern historians have analysed) resonates up and down the socio-political spectrum.

Third, the stability or otherwise of masculinity. *From Boys to Men* notes a number of 'tensions' within different masculine identities, but its main focus ? and, in its 'key role' role, a very useful focus ? is upon normative models. These models tend, by their very nature, to present solid and stable images of being a man: thus, although the way of the journeyman might be fraught, often violent, and economically insecure, the prize at which such men aimed ? marriage as a master craftsman ? was seen as a safe haven and place of rest. (Partly seen thus, of course, because it was constructed in opposition to being a journeyman). But was it? One wonders whether a question on *perspective* becomes somewhat key here: the sense in which, rather than masculinity being simply 'achieved' and thus gained, masculinity is a thing done and redone and redone, in a number of different ways ? and seen as successful or otherwise from a number of different perspectives. A scholar may feel that he has successfully proved himself 'not woman' by being at university, and in the eyes of his peers this may well be so; but in the eyes of, say, the town's artisans .?

Finally, there is a question of the intellectual project. As noted at the beginning, medieval studies is really just beginning to consider masculinity. But elements of what *From Boys to Men* discusses (and on occasion depends upon) have a longer prehistory in our studies, in the analyses of social identity, 'historical anthropology' and indeed '*mentalités*' associated particularly with the later *Annales* school and figures such as Jacques Le Goff, Aaron Gurevich and Pierre Payer.(2) There is a question, then, about what function we play in bringing masculinity (or, more broadly, gender) to the ball. This is not to argue against such a move, but to consider what we are up to, want to be up to, and can effectively be up to, when we make it. One choice would be to direct some of our efforts, perhaps collaboratively, to a more diachronic and comparative set of studies than *From Boys to Men* can provide: to consider (as a task largely undone in any discipline) how masculinity has *changed* over the last ten centuries in the West, and to try to investigate how those changes have come about. If we medievalists pursue the topic purely within our own chosen eras, there may be a sense that we are simply playing intellectual 'catch up' with discussions already more advanced in other fields.

But these final remarks stray rather wide from the book itself and are not meant as criticisms, but as a small contribution to the next stage of the conversation that Ruth Mazo Karras has so adeptly opened. *From Boys to Men* is a very useful and intelligent book, written in a clear and accessible style; usefully reflective and

thought-provoking; and a very welcome addition to a developing area of study.

Notes

1. Clare A. Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1994); Dawn M. Hadley, ed., *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999); Jacqueline Murray, ed., *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York and London, 1999).Back to (1)
2. For example, in these relatively recent publications, Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Fagan (Oxford, 1993); Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Jana Howlett (Cambridge, 1992); Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1993).Back to (2)

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