

Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England

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The explosion of research on early modern gender in England has focused primarily on the experience or perceptions of women. Alexandra Shepard's excellent new book forms part of a new wave directing our attention equally to the construction of early modern masculinity. What gave men 'worth' in the eyes of their contemporaries? How did they achieve and retain 'manhood'? The plural title is significant. As Shepard demonstrates, male codes of honour and esteem varied far more according to factors such as age and status than was the case for women. Only a minority of men possessed all the required attributes, and enjoyed the public credit they bestowed.

Shepard's book will take its place alongside the work of Anthony Fletcher, Elizabeth Foyster, Susan Amussen and Anna Bryson as a key text for early modern masculinity. It should also be read alongside Garthine Walker's recent *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), which also addresses issues of male honour and violence. Shepard's emphasis on the importance of age and the life-cycle links her work further to that of Paul Griffiths and Ilana Ben-Amos (on youth) and Keith Thomas and Lynn Botelho (on old age). Shepard's own book contributes not only to the history of masculinity, but to our understanding of youth, old age, and the broader operation of gender.

The first three chapters, based mainly on medical treatises and prescriptive literature, explore the theoretical dimensions of early modern manhood. Later chapters, focusing on social practice and tensions, draw heavily on the extremely rich records of the University courts of Cambridge. These present an obvious methodological problem, as Shepard acknowledges, in that the social dynamics of a university town differed significantly from those of other urban centres, but she deploys a range of counter-arguments to justify her choice. The Cambridge courts dealt with many cases where plaintiff or defendant had only a tenuous link

with the University, so that their records are as much about town as gown. Operating with written rather than oral testimony, unlike most secular courts, they generated a rich body of deposition material. And the survival of the local ecclesiastical records allows useful comparisons to be made, for example, between the nature of defamation litigation in secular and church courts. Shepard has also drawn on other ecclesiastical records and other secular records (notably London companies' minutes) to balance her Cambridge material.

One of the key themes of the book is that while patriarchy privileged the male sex, by no means all men were beneficiaries. Full manhood implied a specific age-range, sufficient economic independence to provide for a family, and an appropriate 'temperament' enabling the individual to govern his own passions as well as the behaviour of his dependants and inferiors. Shepard gives even more weight to age than to status in assessing these qualifications, at least for the earlier part of the period. Youth was widely perceived in terms of excess and instability. Full manhood belonged only to the 'manly age', and while contemporary writers employed a range of age-schemes, most allowed only about fifteen years (commonly 35–50) before the onset of old age brought diminished capacities and reduced status. Tobias Whitaker thought that by sixty 'naturall imbecillity' rendered a man useless to the commonwealth, while for William Bullein, still more pessimistic, old age began at thirty-five. Even within that narrow window of opportunity, only a minority were held to possess a 'complexion' enabling them to govern themselves and their families judiciously, free from unruly passions. As Shepard remarks, domestic conduct books were intended to educate male householders about their duties and responsibilities as much as their rights. William Gouge, for example, devoted as much emphasis to male tyranny or neglect as to 'froward' wives.

By no means all men were householders, and many who married never achieved full economic independence. For some, this brought a lasting sense of inadequacy and failure. But Shepard rightly emphasises alternative 'meanings of manhood', other criteria by which subordinate males (especially, though not exclusively, the young and the poor) might attain a sense of worth and status within their own social milieu. Young bachelors, in particular, might assert a radically different set of values, characterised by sexual promiscuity, heavy drinking, and violence. While many of their sexual 'conquests' may have been empty brags and fantasy, the Bridewell records confirm that London apprentices were among the most frequent patrons of the capital's bawdy houses. Cambridge students were also given to youthful excess. One group of nocturnal revellers (two of whom later became bishops) masqueraded as the proctor's men and used that cover to hurl insults, smash windows and make themselves generally obnoxious. The cultural world of such young men revolved around friendship and camaraderie. In some cases, as in Shrovetide attacks on London bawdy-houses, young men asserted a collective appropriation of the public authority they generally lacked, a pattern also visible in the fictitious adventures of the Pinder of Wakefield and his band. In other cases, touched on rather briefly here, they might find a sense of power and achievement through football matches and other trials of strength between rival parishes or trades. Individuals, or mixed couples in 'dancing matches', might also win temporary fame at seasonal festivities throughout the year.

Youthful excess leads on to a chapter exploring the culture of male violence. As Shepard observes, some of its forms were officially sanctioned, such as the state's use of violence in war or judicial punishments, and domestic discipline by householders. If the former was exclusively male, women played a rather larger part in domestic discipline than is suggested here; the mistress generally punished the maidservant, and contemporaries disapproved as much of male householders usurping that role as of women beating male apprentices.

The core of the chapter is a close analysis of the unwritten codes governing honour and violence among men. When did a man feel obliged to respond to a challenge or insult? When could he, or should he, ignore it? Shepard shows how men fought mainly with their social equals; it was improper to challenge someone of significantly higher status, and a gentleman insulted or challenged by an inferior found other ways to put him in his place. But in what circumstances could a man decide to sue an equal for assault without risking his reputation? In many cases, Shepard argues persuasively, plaintiffs sued not because of the assault *per se* but because of its circumstances; any attack launched by superior numbers or when the victim was unarmed and exposed could be dismissed as inherently unfair. We might add that recourse to the law sometimes accompanied, rather than substituted for, violence. And, of course, indictments were only one aspect of legal

recourse, so we also need to explain the thousands of recognisances obtained by men against other men who had threatened them. In some cases, they probably feared their adversary would 'break the rules' by ambushing them with a gang of armed supporters. Garthine Walker has recently emphasised that quarrels were often family quarrels, so a plaintiff might also move to bind over an adversary to protect his wife and children rather than himself. Both factors help explain the not infrequent phenomenon of two men each binding over the other. In some cases, no doubt, such considerations also helped men to 'rationalise' a personal aversion to violence. Shepard acknowledges the significance of other influential concepts, whether based on religion, civility, or self-restraint, and while many saw no problem in reconciling these with recourse to violence, the terms on which they sought to do may well have shifted over time.

A chapter entitled 'Respectability, sex and status' raises issues that would almost certainly feature much earlier in a book on female honour and reputation. While this underlines the gendered dimensions of honour, Shepard makes good use of her material to argue convincingly that we should see male and female values as frequently overlapping. The tight restrictions governing what was admissible before an ecclesiastical court served to exaggerate the (admittedly strong) sexual basis to female honour. In the University courts Shepard finds that only half the slanders against women were sexual in character, with slurs based on alleged theft, drunkenness, lying and cheating accounting for the rest. We might add that the thrust of insults such as 'thieving jade' or 'whore of thy tongue', common in the church courts, concerned dishonesty and lying at least as much as sexual promiscuity. Equally Shepard shows that sexual slanders featured in 20 per cent of cases brought by Cambridge townsmen and 30 per cent of those brought by members of the University. She still accepts, nonetheless, that the construction of honour was gender-related, and pays particular emphasis to areas where she feels men defended their honour 'in entirely gender-specific ways, with reference to birth, means, occupation and authority' (p. 182) In cases between men of roughly comparable status, she observes, litigation was often prompted by one party's attempt to claim hierarchical precedence over the other. True – although quarrelling women also rated their own 'worth' in competitive terms, a worth gauged not simply in terms of sexual honesty but with reference to clothes, means and status more generally. In this area too, we may need to think in gender-related rather than gender-specific terms.

'Credit' and its gendered associations form the core of chapter 7. The basis of male honour for the archetypal householder lay in his ability to provide for his family, and in a society where liquid cash was always short, men had to depend on their personal credit (rather than our ubiquitous credit card) to oil their daily transactions. Such credit was a compound of economic sufficiency and a reputation for honesty and reliability, and Shepard documents the centrality of these concerns, building on Craig Muldrew's seminal work. If credit was forfeited, whether through bad luck, incompetence or dishonesty, the very survival of the household was at risk, a subject yet to be fully explored; historians have hitherto devoted far more attention to family formation than to family disintegration. We know too that many poor families depended on the earnings of wives and children to reach a margin of sufficiency, and Shepard shows how in such circumstances a wife's own reputation for economic honesty became important in its own right. Litigation in the Cambridge courts reveals women not only trading and bargaining, but fighting to retain or regain their own economic credit.

The book ends with a survey of old age in its gendered context. With no retirement age, a man still enjoying physical and mental health could go on as long as he wished, and urban magistrates were often in their fifties and sixties. But most of those reaching old age encountered increasing medical problems that might well reduce them to poverty and force them to give up house-keeping. The loss of economic and political independence was likely to bring a rapid diminution of respect as well as status, and Shepard suggests that women may have adjusted better than men to the problems of old age. Spinning and knitting, though ill-paid, frequently enabled aged women to keep working and earning to the very end. By contrast, men who had earned their bread through heavy manual labour might be rendered totally dependent once their physical strength had gone.

This book focuses on the period 1560–1640, a period favoured by social historians not least because it coincides with the high point of ecclesiastical court litigation. How do Shepard's findings fit into the longer-term history of gender, and the evolution of 'meanings of manhood'? In a brief conclusion, she suggests that

the social and cultural shifts of the period meant that traditional codes of patriarchal masculinity, closely linked to economic independence, were progressively confined to a shrinking proportion of the population. If a culture of respectability and civility was becoming stronger but more socially distinctive, it would follow that a larger swathe of the male population was left to find solace or alternative forms of status via other means. The world of drink, gaming and roistering condemned by the conduct books represented an alternative model of manhood, always attractive to some. Shepard has concentrated on what she calls (following R. W. Connell) the 'hegemonic' meaning of manhood in early modern England, while emphasising throughout the importance of alternative meanings for other male groups. One task facing future scholars will be to tease out these alternative meanings of manhood for those who embraced them. To conduct-book writers and magistrates alike, drinking, gaming, wenching and fighting represented dangerous manifestations of disorder, or at best reprehensible 'tricks of youth'. But to those involved, as Shepard observes, they comprised alternative codes of manhood, with (presumably) their own unwritten rules and hierarchies. We are still far from fully understanding these rules. And what of those young and unprivileged men who aspired to some modest 'reputation' but had no wish to endorse the alternative values of disorder? Alexandra Shepard's fine book constitutes an important addition to the literature of gender in early modern England, and her emphasis on diversity in contemporary meanings of manhood lays down a challenge for others to pursue still further.

Dr Shepard would like to thank Professor Capp for his generous review, and does not wish to comment further.

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