

## **Fashioning Masculinity. National identity and language in the eighteenth century**

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Robert B. Shoemaker

Growing out of recent work on gender, scholars are now turning their attention to the history of masculinity. A key aspect of this subject is how masculinity is constructed, since, in the words of Michael Roper and John Tosh, 'masculinity is never fully possessed, but must perpetually be achieved, asserted and renegotiated'. The eighteenth century, a period frequently seen as pivotal in shaping modern gender roles for women, is providing fertile ground for historians of masculinity as well. In this clearly written and carefully argued book, Michèle Cohen investigates the role played by the French language and conceptions of otherness in shaping ideas about the education and self-fashioning of gentlemen in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England. Her initial concern was to explain how French came to be perceived as a 'female' language, as it is by school children today, but her research led her to investigate changes in gentlemanly ideals over the period from the late-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries.

The book starts in France, with an examination of the French concepts of *politesse* and the *honnête homme* in the seventeenth century, in which gentlemen were expected to perfect their social skills through conversation with women in the *salons*: not only would men learn from the refined and delicate discourse of women, but their own conversation would be improved by their efforts to please their female audience. In the late seventeenth century a similar, but not identical, code of conduct became influential in England, politeness, which also viewed the ability to converse in French, the universal language of European courts at the time, as an important skill. Once again women were expected to play a crucial role, but concerns were

now expressed that overexposure to female conversation would make men effeminate, and this concern extended to the influence mothers exerted over their sons. One of the advantages of the Grand Tour, which became fashionable as a means of completing the education of young gentleman around the turn of the eighteenth century, was that it removed boys from their mothers. But there were worries that such travel could corrupt, and that by encouraging men to develop ornamental accomplishments for public display, the Grand Tour also rendered men effeminate. By the late eighteenth century, men were expected to spend less time honing skills for public display and were expected instead to develop their mental faculties and acquire the virtue of sincerity. Taciturnity, which had once been seen as typical fault of English gentlemen, now became 'the emblem of his self-discipline, and his strength – in other words, of his manliness' (p. 105).

As a consequence, learning French was now seen in a new light. Men were no longer expected to cultivate their tongues by learning foreign languages through conversation, and the attention shifted to studying grammar as a means of developing analytical skills. But French grammar was seen as too simple, and the foreign language education of boys (now taking place in public schools rather than on the Grand Tour) turned to Latin. Correspondingly, the teaching of French came to be associated predominantly with girls, where it was seen as an essential female accomplishment, but one which, due to the alleged simplicity of the language, was not seen as threatening male intellectual superiority. The English gentleman abandoned French, with its associations with seductive and trifling feminine conversation, and returned to his own less flowery, 'monosyllabic' language, which was more suited for men with deep thoughts but little need to express them in conversation. From the point of view of men, women's conversation became superfluous. This 'derogation of the tongue', according to Cohen, thus reinforced both gender and national differences.

This is cleverly developed argument, which solves Cohen's original problem and, by bringing together diverse evidence, clearly demonstrates the important and changing role played by language acquisition in ideas about the proper education of English gentlemen (and ladies). In doing so, Cohen demonstrates the importance for historians of masculinity of examining the social and cultural processes (notably informal sociability and formal education) by which masculine identities have been shaped, and the importance for historians of women of the interrelationship between ideas about masculinity and ideas about femininity. But this is a very short book (150 pages of text and notes), and this reader would have liked to learn more, particularly about *why* these conceptions of masculinity changed in this way at this time. If masculinity, according to the quote from Roper and Tosh quoted earlier (and cited by Cohen), has to be perpetually renegotiated, why did its redefinition in this period take the particular form that it did? Implicitly, Cohen suggests that the crucial causes were intellectual: the coming together of the discourses of civic humanism and politeness in the late seventeenth century, and their subsequent replacement by new ideas about education and gender difference from writers such as David Fordyce and Hannah More in the mid to late eighteenth century. But the forces which shaped ideas about proper gentlemanly behaviour, gender difference, and national identity in the eighteenth century were surely far more complex, involving in addition important changes in society, culture and politics.

A gentleman is a man with power, power over his social inferiors as well as over women, and it is important to consider how the changing social and economic position of such men influenced their strategies to maintain their social position. At the start of this period, the definition of a gentlemen was rapidly changing, from one based on birth to one based on wealth and lifestyle. As the Swiss writer Guy Miège commented in 1703, 'anyone that, without a Coat of Arms, has either a liberal or genteel education, that looks gentleman-like (whether he be so or not) and has the wherewithal to live freely and handsomely, is by the courtesy of England usually called a gentlemen.' In order to incorporate the growing number of merchants and professionals who were wealthier than traditionally-defined gentlemen, and to allow for the possibility that the gentry could exchange status for wealth with the upper-middle class through marriage, definitions of gentility changed at this time, placing more emphasis on the display of status and wealth and less on ancestry. This helps explain why there was such an emphasis on display in the self-fashioning of the gentleman at this time. Later in the eighteenth century the middle and upper classes saw less of a need for intermingling, as a separate middle class identity, critical of the alleged luxury and effeminacy of the upper classes, began to form. As Kathleen Wilson has shown, such critiques were fuelled by middle-class

complaints concerning alleged corruption and the unrepresentative nature of aristocratic government, as 'the aristocratic state was identified with "French influence"'. From the point of view of gentlemen and nobles seeking to preserve their social position, it is not surprising in this context that public display and the French language became less central to their ideals.

The privatisation of gentlemanly self-fashioning can also, however, be related to the increasing differentiation between public and private life which occurred at this time, as domestic virtues and behaviour became more sharply differentiated from life outside the home. Such broad cultural changes explain why this period witnessed the 'derogation of the tongue'. This change affected all social classes, as demonstrated by the sharp decline over this period in the number of books and pamphlets not associated with foreign languages that were published with the word 'tongue' in the title. Moreover, it affected both men *and* women: in this sense the changes documented in this book did not always work to accentuate gender differences. As Cohen shows, by the late eighteenth century both sexes were expected to pay more attention to grammar and reading when studying foreign languages at the expense of oral skills, especially conversation. Thus, for both ladies and gentlemen public display became less important. Although Cohen possibly overemphasises the novelty of the emergence in the latter half of the eighteenth century of the 'domestic sphere' as the proper locus of female virtue in prescriptions for women, the moral importance placed on domestic life for women echoed the growing distrust of male 'accomplishments' which depended on public display.

Finally, in explaining why increasing attention was focused on difference in conceptions of gender and national identity in this period, factors in addition to the self-fashioning strategies of gentlemen need to be considered. A number of other developments clearly reinforced gender differences in this period, including new forms of literature (especially the novel) and the Evangelical Revival. And as Linda Colley and Kathleen Wilson have shown, political developments at home and the frequent European wars during the period (in which France was by far the most threatening enemy) were crucial elements in the forging of British (or English) national identity, which was frequently conceptualised in opposition to the effeminate 'other' of the French, with their perceived propensity to licentiousness, tyrannical government, and 'popish' religion. Cohen explicitly rejects Colley's argument that the Napoleonic wars caused a reevaluation of the merits of speaking French, since 'the fashion for learning French actually increased after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.' (p. 99) Yet Cohen's own evidence demonstrates that in many other respects the period of the Napoleonic Wars was clearly formative in changing English attitudes towards the role played by language in gentlemanly self-fashioning. Ladies and gentlemen may have continued to speak French, but Cohen argues that this was the period when learning French came to be seen as 'an insipid occupation' for men and 'came to be associated predominantly with females' (pp. 62, 83). Since France and the French were often conceptualised in female terms, it certainly seems likely that war with France, an essential element in the formation of British national identity, played an important role shaping attitudes that the French language was unsuitable for gentlemen.

In sum, the cultural phenomenon documented in this book is associated with broader changes, which put the English upper classes on the defensive, rendered public life a less acceptable venue for character formation, and encouraged hostility to foreign (especially French) influences: all these developments contributed to the 'derogation of the tongue'. The connection between attitudes towards language study and the formation of gender and national identities thus provides a good illustration of how definitions of masculinity (and femininity) are intimately interconnected with wider social, cultural and political forces, in which the directions of influence work both ways.

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