

Étude critique — Review Essay

Gender in History: The New History of Masculinity

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Paula Baker — *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life. Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870–1930*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp. xi, 251.

George Barker-Benfield — *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Pp. xxxiv, 520.

Catherine Hall — *White, Male, and Middle Class. Explorations in Feminism and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Pp. vii, 307.

Lesley Hall — *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900–1950*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1991, Pp. viii, 218.

Robert Nye — *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pp. ix, 315.

Joel Rosenthal — *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth-Century England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. Pp. xv, 285.

SIX NEW STUDIES of the history of masculinity, ranging in time from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries and in location from England to France and the United States, indicate the variety of approaches to the subject and how far the notion of a distinct men's history has been accepted by historians in the last five years. The historians represented here do not begin with the assumption that men require a history of their own, as women did 20 years ago, and do not always attempt to isolate men as a separate group, in the manner of women's historians. These histories do not necessarily make gender the sole focus of attention: much new work in this field uses the

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concept of gender without concentrating on it as a primary subject. Instead they call attention to the arbitrary nature of conventional masculinity and femininity and to the ways in which sex roles are enforced by society. The new history of masculinity attempts to show the complexity of male power and privilege.

Although the writing of women's history acquired professional respectability in the 1970s after a short, fierce fight for acceptance, the concept of men's history continues to elicit surprise to this day, for several reasons. First, the phrase "men's history" suggests a kinship with women's history that is problematic. Women's history is self-consciously separate, informed by feminism, and developed to fill many gaps in our knowledge about women's past.¹ Men's history has no such mandate because it has no unique ideological foundation and because much of the territory it covers is already familiar. Its contribution to historical debate, so far, is contained in the new perspective it has to offer on well-known issues and events. For this reason, new work in men's history is better termed the history of masculinity or, more broadly, gender history. Such phrases make the point that those who practise these disciplines are not attempting to establish a form of history entirely separate from that of women. This is not prescriptive but descriptive: the history of masculinity as it is now developing is not "separatist" in ideology or content.

Some historians also object to the notion of a separate "men's history" because it seems superfluous. Men wrote, read, and were the subjects of most of the histories written in the world until very recently. Would men's history draw attention away from women's issues? This seemed all the more possible because men's history emerged at the same time as did a new movement for "men's liberation", which argued that men must be allowed more child custody rights and must be freed from the competitive struggle for success and material possessions. The movement aroused some hostility from feminists, not because they disagreed with its aims, but because they feared that it drew mistaken parallels between men's problems and those of women. It appeared to some historians that men's history as a new discipline might make the same claims.

Why, in that case, did the concept of men's history emerge? One of its major influences came from the social sciences. In the last two decades much new writing has called attention to the ways in which ideas about male and female sex roles develop and are accepted by ordinary men and women. Until rather recently, little in this new branch of study was written by historians. Social scientists, including sociologists and psychologists, were the pioneers in the field.² For a time, the men's liberation movement

1 Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck, "Introduction", in Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck, eds., *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 4-5.

2 Among earlier books discussing men's psychology in relation to history are Jack Nichols, *Men's*

led to an increased interest among social scientists in the unique experiences of men.

Feminism and women's history have also been an important influence on the history of masculinity. In the late 1970s, Peter Stearns and Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck, as well as a number of less well-known social scientists and historians, began to insist that there was much in history that could not be understood without a close examination of the nature of masculinity and its changing forms.³ A number of women's historians have also recently begun to agree that the study of men might be a valuable complement to women's history, if it did not attempt to replace women's studies or adopt an anti-feminist stance.⁴ The history of masculinity is now accepted as a legitimate field of inquiry, if we may count the increasing number of books and articles devoted to it as proof.⁵

Perhaps the most important influence on the history of masculinity has been the perception, drawn from the literary theorists of deconstruction, that all polarities, like the concept of masculine and feminine, must be understood in relation to each other:

Fixed oppositions conceal the heterogeneity of either category, the extent to which terms presented as oppositional are interdependent. ... Furthermore, the interdependence is usually hierarchical. ... This kind of analysis ... makes it possible to study systematically the conflictual processes that produce meanings.⁶

The new history of masculinity is a study of such deconstructed relationships: the relationship of the rich and powerful to the poor and weak; of older men to younger ones; of men to women. Above all, it attempts to refine and elaborate the concept of patriarchy. Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck made a number of historians in North America aware that the term patriar-

Liberation: A New Definition of Masculinity (New York: 1975); Robert A. Lewis, ed., *Men in Difficult Times* (New Jersey: 1981); J. Dubbert, ed., *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (New Jersey: 1979). These are primarily collections of works by social scientists, containing few essays on history *per se*.

3 See Pleck and Pleck, "Introduction", in *The American Man*; Peter Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), p. 1.

4 See Veronica Beechey, "On Patriarchy", *Feminist Review*, no. 3 (1979), pp. 66-83; Sheila Rowbotham, "The Trouble with Patriarchy", in R. Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: 1981). For later comments, see S. Walby, "Theorizing Patriarchy", *Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1989), pp. 213-234; Joan Acker, "The Trouble with Patriarchy", *Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1989), pp. 235-240.

5 The increasing acceptance of men's history is evident in the fact that the *American Historical Review* began in 1993 to include upcoming books on the subject in a separate book review category.

6 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 7.

chy was perhaps too monolithic to be of much value to careful scholars.⁷ As one historian wrote in 1989, the ahistorical fashion in which the term patriarchy is typically employed presents problems: it is used to refer to a kinship-based system of government; as a generalized term for masculine oppression; to designate a mechanism in the social reproduction of capitalism; and to describe a combined sex-class system. This confusion has made careful attention to the experience of men from different classes, races, and times important to historians eager to understand the role of gender in history.⁸

In *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth-Century England*, Joel Rosenthal attempts to consider male and female roles in the family as discrete subjects for enquiry during a period when the modern world was beginning to take shape. Rosenthal is one of several historians who have sought, in the last five years, to use the concept of gender to broaden our understanding of male and female roles within the family in the early modern era.⁹ Perhaps the absence of this category was the most obvious fault in the work of the great "family historians" of the last three decades. Peter Laslett, Lawrence Stone, Alan MacFarlane, and Philippe Aries each allowed the separate roles of men and women within the family to be subsumed to some degree by generalizations about different modes of family life and the role of the family in society.¹⁰ Women's historians also tended to neglect gender roles as they studied the role of women in the family. The value of the concept of masculinity in Rosenthal's study is that it leads him to consider the very different contributions of both sexes to a particular type of sexual and social power structure.

Rosenthal argues that early modern English customs like primogeniture were a source of power for all men, rich or poor.¹¹ Earlier family historians tended to imagine that such customs were relevant only to the rich and

7 Pleck and Pleck, *The American Man*, pp. 7–36.

8 Malcolm Waters, "Patriarchy and Viriarchy: An Exploration and Reconstruction of Concepts of Masculine and Domination", *Sociology*, vol 23, no. 2 (1989), pp. 193–194.

9 Other historians of the last five years who have sought to use gender as a category of family history include Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society, Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (1988; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); James Casey, *The History of the Family* (New York: Blackwell, 1989); J. R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: 1985).

10 Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York: Macmillan, 1984); Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983); Philippe Aries *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Random House, 1965); Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300–1840* (New York: Blackwell, 1988). See also Susan D. Amussen, "Early Modern Social History in Perspective", *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1990), pp. 80–85.

11 Primogeniture and patrilinealism, according to Rosenthal, might play a part in the inheritance squabbles of both the rich and the poor. See Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth-Century England*, pp. 7, 15.

only within the family. Rosenthal, studying men's power and privilege rather than family structures or human sentiments, believes that primogeniture both solidified the power of England's leading families and effectively excluded women at all social levels from being centres of family power until they were widows — if then.¹² Even so, he suggests that social distinctions between men and women in the fifteenth century may not have been as important as those between rich and poor, propertied and property-less.¹³ This is an issue that neither women's historians nor Marxists have adequately examined, and it may be that historians of gender like Rosenthal will be able to address it more effectively.

Rosenthal's work looks at a critical period in the formation of English notions of masculinity, during which many of the laws and customs that gave increasing importance to gender/sex in determining power within the family were first instituted. As Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck might point out, he looks at the period of "agrarian patriarchy", in which landed property was the chief form of wealth and the most important tool of parental control; but his analysis differs from that of other historians of the family and examines an earlier period than the seventeenth-century New England of *The American Man*.¹⁴ In contrast to MacFarlane, he suggests that English inheritance laws actually supported the power of fathers and tended to leave sons in a dependent position.¹⁵ This conclusion is supported by other recent studies of marriage and the family, which generally accept the idea that, whatever children's personal affections might have been, it was very difficult for children to dismiss their parents' wishes in the questions of whom they married or where they worked.¹⁶ Rosenthal does not allow himself to be caught up in the sterile debate over when the nuclear, patriarchal family superseded the "clan"; he concentrates instead on showing how culture and law supported the power of the father and maintained the patrilineal family.

George Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility* takes another approach to the history of masculinity. It looks at the establishment of "sensibility" as a literary mode of culture in eighteenth-century England, one that initially seemed to promise great changes in the accepted roles of men and women alike, in both public and private life. Barker-Benfield admits his debt to American women's history and declares that, in the light of their

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

14 Pleck and Pleck, *The American Man*, pp. 6–14.

15 Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege*, pp. 28–29. See also Alan MacFarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 125. MacFarlane suggests that Puritan fathers, specifically, were less able to control their children than many historians believed. He extends this argument in *Marriage and Love in England* to include English fathers in general.

16 See Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, who makes this his main argument.

success, he chose to dramatize the significance of sex in eighteenth-century society.¹⁷

Barker-Benfield's discussion of the development of modern ideas of masculinity and femininity points out the importance of Locke and other seventeenth-century writers in popularizing the idea that human beings are made, not born. This ought to have meant that a psychology of human nature and intelligence untainted by the concept of innate sex difference could flourish. The notion of innate sex difference was soon restored to the new Lockean psychology, however, and only men were able to benefit from the self-fashioning that it promised. Women were doomed to suffer experience, to endure their sensibility — and thus the notion of sensibility became feminized.¹⁸ Sensibility was increasingly personified as a female goddess during this period, seen as tender, innocent, and natural. This is perhaps the root of our contemporary assumption that women are more "sensitive" (or "sensible", to use the eighteenth-century term) than men. Further, the identification of sensibility with nature and of women with sensibility meant that the culture of sensibility preserved the old Manichean dualism that had long identified women with matter.

The identification of women with feeling was to have important consequences for later developments in Anglo-American culture. Much has been written about this period by literary and political historians, but Barker-Benfield attempts to use the gender "paradigm" to yield new insights into the social functions of male and female writers as they helped to reshape popular ideals about men, women, and love. He argues that female writers exploited the fashion for sensibility in their novels and helped to forge a consciousness of women's mission. Male writers, on the other hand, feared that the rise of commerce and the subsequent cult of feeling and sensation would lead to the degeneration of the classical ideal of the warrior/farmer.¹⁹ Paradoxically, as they lost their former control of the literary world, they opened a place for female novelists and ultimately for feminism. It is interesting to note that Barker-Benfield's analysis of the period corresponds in many respects with the description of the "Commercial Age" of masculinity proffered in *The American Man*, with the difference that his study locates the beginning of the era of diminishing masculine privilege earlier in the eighteenth century.²⁰

In Catherine Hall's new book, *White, Male, and Middle Class*, we are given the opportunity to see how this sense of diminished male power operated among the commercial middle classes in the nineteenth century. Hall's work is a collection of essays ranging from a discussion of her

17 George Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, p. xxxiv.

18 This summary is drawn from the Introduction to *The Culture of Sensibility*.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

20 Pleck and Pleck in *The American Man* identify the commercial age of patriarchy as beginning in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening in the 1790s. See pp. 14–15.

experience with feminist history, to a piece echoing her earlier work on the formation of the Birmingham middle classes, to a discussion of Carlyle, Mill, and Governor Eyre in the well-known dispute about slavery in England's sugar colonies. Hall shares Rosenthal's interest in the ways in which families built up power both individually and as members of a particular class. Hall attempts to bring together in one book a study of the public and private influences of nineteenth-century ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Hall states that her intention is to "deconstruct" masculinity, marking her book as explicitly postmodern. In postmodernist fashion, she attempts to show how race, gender, and class worked together to consolidate middle-class power.²¹ In the essay "Race, Ethnicity, and Difference", which looks at gender and ethnicity in England in the 1830s and 1840s, Hall shows that national identity was important to middle-class men in this period, but that they were only able to define their identity in relation to the inferiority of other national and sexual identities.²² By looking towards the planters and the slaves of Jamaica, Englishmen of the middle classes were able to define themselves as free, neither decadent aristocrats nor black slaves. By looking at middle-class women, still not allowed to vote or to own property if they were married, middle-class men could also gauge the level of their freedom and masculinity. Thus, definitions of masculinity and femininity marked out the English middle class, separated it from other classes, and created links between disparate groups within that class, ultimately consolidating its power.²³

It is not certain that Hall's approach to masculinity and to gender yields any new insights into men's power and women's subordination: in an essay on men and women in working-class culture she concludes with the observation that men were legitimated as workers, women as wives and mothers, in their participation in radical politics.²⁴ This is no surprise to anyone familiar with nineteenth-century women's history, and in fact one of the problems for anyone attempting to write the history of masculinity is that some of the territory has already been covered by women's historians, from a slightly different angle. It is difficult to see that Hall has succeeded in helping to refine the definition of nineteenth-century patriarchy. Hall's book, particularly its opening section "Feminism and Feminist History", detailing her own experiences as a feminist and historian, is considerably more political in tone than the other histories considered here. At the same time,

21 Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class*, pp. 18–35.

22 The idea that categories of identity require polar opposites, usually inferior in hierarchical rank, in order to be clearly defined is one that Hall has drawn from deconstructionist theory. See, for example, Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 7.

23 Catherine Hall, "Missionary Stories: Gender and Ethnicity in England in the 1830s and 1840s", in *White, Male, and Middle Class*, pp. 205–254.

24 "Gender and Working-Class Culture", in *ibid.*, p. 147.

she is quick to acknowledge that her perception of the political has changed since the 1960s. Hall now believes that “the personal is political”. Her book began in part as a rebellion against the British Marxist historians who saw class as gender-blind and who believed that all essential political change would occur with a class revolution.²⁵ This raises a possible difficulty in the “gendered” approach to history, one hinted at by Rosenthal as well: the interest in gender as an historical category may make us lose sight of perhaps more serious social divisions.

Paula Baker’s *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life* moves away from the study of the family to examine the influence of gender roles in public life, in this case during America’s Gilded Age in rural New York. Baker does not intend to write a history of masculinity alone; she is attempting a history of political culture that takes gender into account in the way that earlier political histories learned to consider class and ethnicity. Her purpose is to pay attention to masculine and feminine themes in political life and to see how ideas about women both encouraged and restrained their political activities.²⁶

Men, Baker argues, dominated voting and office-holding in the Gilded Age as they slowly let go of their prejudices against party politics. In an age of high voter turnout, they attacked the other party’s record or defended their own with great passion. Devotion to party was a male virtue and part of male culture, although a tradition of women’s activism grew up alongside the male world of politics.²⁷ This activism expressed itself in a concern for the home and became an expression of female virtue. By the 1920s, Baker concludes, political morality was no longer grounded in such ideas about the complementary roles of men and women. One of the links between the public and private spheres was severed.²⁸ Baker’s analysis in the end is not only concerned with sex roles in public life, but with reasons for the change in the political climate at the start of the twentieth century that resulted in a much less partisan form of politics, which was a “cleaner” but paradoxically less of a moral arena.

As a monograph, Baker’s work is not as theoretical as Hall’s, in the sense that Baker is not concerned with long-term changes in the definition of middle-class masculinity and femininity. She makes it clear that she is considering only rural New York, at a time when the area was mostly white and Protestant. It is difficult to extrapolate generalizations about gender and masculinity from such limited studies because concepts of gender vary so much from one group to another. Still, there are many similarities of gender construction between the middle-class Anglo-Protestants of Hall’s England

25 “Feminism and Feminist History”, in *ibid.*, p. 11.

26 Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life*, p. xiv–xv.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. xvi, 24–25.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

and those of Baker's New York, including the idealization of mother, home, and family and the tendency to assume that men were better suited to public life because of their greater coarseness as well as their greater capacity for reasoning. It is not clear whether this similarity is the result of class, or of ethnic kinship, or of a basic constant in human life, but this is surely a question for historians to examine.

In *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*, Robert Nye steps outside the circle of Anglo-American culture to provide a different perspective on the nineteenth-century construction of masculinity. Like Rosenthal, Hall, and Baker, Nye is concerned with the ways in which gender — more specifically masculinity — operated in both the public and private spheres. He examines how honour developed as an aristocratic concept of sexual identity in the *Ancien Régime* and was then adapted by the French bourgeoisie to suit its own needs, putting sexual and military discipline to the service of the bourgeois state.²⁹ Nye is unable to explain the origins of the honour code, although he raises the possibility that it might not have been a social construct imposed from above, but might have deeper roots in Mediterranean culture.³⁰

The bourgeoisie enshrined its notions of masculine and feminine honour in the new laws of the Napoleonic era and elaborated them between 1860 and 1914 in its rediscovery of the rituals of fencing and the duel.³¹ The bourgeois code of honour, Nye concludes, was created to sustain order in a patriarchal and violent world, but survived into our time in a fashion that helped to perpetuate both patriarchy and violence. He takes a longer view of history and recognizes that the code of honour he describes existed in many forms in other European societies, considering the wider implications of the nineteenth-century honour code for Europe and the world, as France's last duelling manual was published at the end of the Great War.³²

Unfortunately, the weakness of Nye's broad approach is that we seldom have the satisfaction of looking at the actual operation of the honour code among nineteenth-century men. Nye usually restricts himself to a theoretical dissection of the major historical events of his era, with reference to a number of well-known secondary sources, including Foucault. Only the last chapters looking at the rituals of duelling avoid the problem of abstraction and support their arguments with more than token empirical evidence.

Most intriguing is Nye's discussion of the theory of the history of masculinity. He proposes that one of the major debates of gender history is that between "essentialists", who argue that gender is a fixed quality, and

29 Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor*, pp. 8–9.

30 *Ibid.*, pp.9–10, 28–30.

31 See "The Roots of Bourgeois Honorability", chap. 3, and "Honor and the Duel in the Third Republic", chap. 9, in *ibid.*

32 "Conclusion: Courage", chap. 10, in *ibid.*

constructionists, who believe that it is mutable, a social rather than a biological category.³³ The six historians presented here are generally constructionists; but the wide dissemination of the results of a study by neuroscientist Simon LeVay in 1991, which indicated that homosexual preferences may be innate or biologically determined, may lead intellectuals back to a more biologically determined understanding of sexual differences in general. It is one of the curiosities of contemporary thought that, as the biological and social sciences today move towards a greater acceptance of biological determinism, the arts are increasingly prone to accept the idea that all reality is socially constructed.

Lesley Hall's *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900–1950* addresses male sexuality more directly than Nye, looking at the period in the early twentieth century when the last vestiges of the old feudal ideology were finally purged from European public life. Hall's purpose, however, is to consider not the public implications of male sexual identity, but the private anxieties of men attempting to live up to a very restrictive definition of masculinity. Hall attempts to "deconstruct the monolithic phallus".³⁴ As doctors and men themselves tended in the past to see male sexuality as normative, historians have tended to write of men as though they never suffered from sexual anxiety, as though, for men, sexual identity was relatively uncomplicated.

Hall makes use of the collection of letters addressed by men to Marie Stopes, famous in her time as a birth control activist and a writer who discussed sex and sexual problems. The collection is of interest for several reasons: men (and women) from all classes wrote to Stopes; they felt free to be unusually frank; and they came from around the world, although Hall restricts herself to letters written by British citizens and to those from the Dominions and Eire.

Hall makes it clear that even for "normal" heterosexual men, sexuality and the sex act were fraught with anxiety and, in an age when venereal disease was already common, danger. At the same time, men and even male doctors lived by a sexual code that did not allow them to seek information, admit ignorance, or complain of mistreatment. Some of the most remarkable letters quoted in Hall's book are those from men who were sexually abused by older men or even by women, interesting because they indicate both that men might experience abuse and that they have always remained extremely reluctant to talk about it.³⁵ If men could menstruate, Hall writes, in an amusing answer to Gloria Steinem's famous essay, common wisdom would probably concur that Real Men do not have cramps or PMS.³⁶

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

34 Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, p. 1.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Certain historians have expressed the fear that such an emphasis upon men's problems in the past will somehow allow them to escape responsibility for their part in the suppression of women or to deny the real advantages of power they enjoyed in comparison to other groups. Men's letters to Stopes do suggest that men suffered for their privileges, but Hall makes it clear that they also exploited them. She also points out that women's letters to Marie Stopes have already been thoroughly examined by historians, while the problems of heterosexual men of the same era have received little attention. "To turn the gaze onto the male, when this is not a matter of staring at a clothed and triumphant hero, is a subversive project", writes Hall.³⁷ The benefit of such deconstructive detective work is that it may begin to explain how men's power might be maintained at the expense of personal happiness and even the public good. Additionally, Hall points out that the frailty of sexual potency may be connected with the search for potency in other senses, an important point when feminist debate is currently disputing whether men are constantly and dangerously potent. The nature of male "sexuality", another social construct, is one that has attracted considerable attention from feminist thinkers recently. Because so much of our current understanding of male/female differences has grown up around a conviction of men's capacity for sexual violence and possessiveness, it is important to explore the nuances, the contradictions, and the hesitations covered by the general phrase "male sexuality": in short, to deconstruct it.³⁸

What are the discoveries of these historians of masculinity? The subject is still so new that few scholars in the field have begun to synthesize their knowledge. A common theme among gender historians looking at the nineteenth century is the increasing similarity of gender ideals across Europe and North America as the century progressed. A trans-European internationalism is apparent in all areas of life towards the end of the nineteenth century. Until the eighteenth century, different regions of Europe might well have had very different definitions of "manliness"; by the end of the nineteenth century, however, the distinction between French, English, and other national or regional ideals of masculinity had greatly diminished. This is supported by the apparent breakdown in class differences in prescribed gender roles, evident in the way that many people in the working classes eventually began to accept in the late-nineteenth century that women belonged in the home, as an ideal if not a reality. Did middle-class Anglo-American models of domestic life and male-female relations eventually triumph over all other European models? No one has asked the question yet, but it demands an answer.

Is the history of masculinity worth pursuing, or is it an unnecessary fad,

37 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

one developed to give men their right to victimhood or to provide new angles on old subjects? There is surely no further need to fear that the study of men's history will give undue attention to men. Women's historians were among the first to acknowledge the need to study masculinity, because they saw that the structures of power for men tended to vary with the emergence of new classes and of new roles for women. Social historians perceived that to study the culture of masculinity was important because without it many changes in the institutions of power, like education, government, and politics, could not be fully understood. The works reviewed here indicate that the history of masculinity evolved to solve certain problems that could not be addressed without looking at men directly. How, for example, could we hope to understand the strange transference of the honour code from the nobility to the bourgeoisie without looking at men? How could we hope to understand the sheer multiplicity of modes of "patriarchal" domination, the ways in which the entire economic and political systems of a nation like England might change over 200 years and still leave men in control of society, albeit with some constraints on their power through class and money?

There are still many critics of gender and masculinity studies. One valuable point they have made is that, because the concept of gender is so nebulous and because its evolution must be tracked in so many obscure venues, it introduces an element of abstract theorizing into historical writing that may threaten the hard-won empiricism of the last two decades. Gender history may make it too easy for clever and lazy historians to make observations with no evidence and minimal intellectual consistency. The danger perceived by Bryan Palmer in his polemical *Descent into Discourse* is that gender as an analytical category will distract historians from the material realities of power, and above all of class.³⁹ It should no longer be necessary, after E. P. Thompson, to defend the study of culture as an important aspect of the study of power, but historians trained in the 1970s during the years of reaction against narrative history and "literary" sources, like diaries, letters, and other relics of higher culture, may be suspicious of such arguments.

Gender history as it has developed is analogous to the history of ethnicity in its use of culture to study the operations of power. In its *fin de siècle* obsession with role-playing and masks, its consciousness of the artificiality of sex roles and of the "natural" world, it shows a "postmodern" sensibility. Finally, its focus on culture and on literary sources may be a sign of a basic shift in attitude among some historians: perhaps a loss of faith in the ability of routinely-generated sources to reveal objective reality, or in objectivity

39 Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. xii-xiii.

itself.⁴⁰ Can even laboriously collected statistics grasp reality? Supporters of gender history would argue that its strength is that it is openly “engaged” with its subject: it does not share the objectivist pretensions of the social history of the 1970s and early 1980s, although many of us may be wary of this tendency. The new histories of men are driven by a desire to understand the immemorial, recurring, persistent nature of male power in human society. This issue, not yet resolved, makes studies of gender in history a matter of pressing curiosity and need.

40 There are a variety of examples of the new tendency among historians to distrust such sources. See Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth A. Smith, “Theorizing the Writing of History, or ‘I can’t think why it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention’ ”, *Journal of Social History* (1988–1989), pp. 149–161; also Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 8: “For many social historians, archives are sacred places where one culls from documents ‘facts’ about the past.” The quotation marks around “facts” suggest Scott’s ironic attitude to the way historians conventionally use facts and archives.