

## Erecting, Entering, Emitting: Early Modern Definitions of Manhood and Masculinity

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According to one Spanish proverb, "Not everything is a man that pisses on a wall, after all, dogs piss too."<sup>[1]</sup> Despite its vulgarity, this aphorism astutely encapsulates how masculinity was roughly defined in the early modern era, spanning from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. According to early moderns, the mere possession of male genitalia, meaning the capacity to "piss on a wall," was not enough to ensure entrance into the privileged ranks of manhood. Court records of the era demonstrate that "true" men had to possess *fully functioning* genitals, capable of "erection, penetration and ejaculation."<sup>[2]</sup> This emphasis on the sexual performativity of manhood was a product of the conditions of Europe's patriarchal society. For early modern males, marriage was the final step into adulthood, and facilitated participation in commercial and political spheres. However, no marriage was legitimate without sexual consummation of a very specific form: vaginal penetration by the male. Additionally, masculine sexual functionality was both the basis for and reinforcement of male superiority over women.

The legal treatment of abnormality or "otherness" often reveals a great deal about the cultural norms of an era. For instance, trials of hermaphrodites in early modern France speak to the nature of contemporaneous views of normative masculinity. These French trials reveal that the possession of a penis was not sufficient cause to be assigned male gender. As Cathy McClive notes, gender assignment in virtually all these trials was made on the basis of whether the hermaphrodite had a *functional* penis. In the case of the individual referred to as Grandjean, who was said to have "all the attributes of masculinity,"<sup>[3]</sup> most notably the presence of a penis and the capacity for erections, "her" inability to ejaculate prevented "her" from being defined as male. On the other hand, Marie/Marin, who lived as a woman until twenty, was determined to be male on the strength of "his" capacity to ejaculate and the testimony of "his" partner to the effect that they had engaged in penetrative intercourse.<sup>[4]</sup> From these gender assignments, we can see that the capacity for sexual performance was of the utmost importance to the masculine identity.

McClive further contends that these trials, and the imposition of static gender identities upon hermaphrodites, reflect the fear of early modern society that "counterfeiters" were unjustly availing themselves of the "dividends of masculinity"<sup>[5]</sup> that only legitimate members of the privileged sex were entitled to. She writes that, "Deception and imposture were major concerns," because the "corporeal" proof of a man's legitimacy, namely the functionality of his penis, was concealed from public view.<sup>[6]</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that early moderns looked to other, more visible signs of a man's virility. In this era, beard growth was understood to be connected to the production of semen. One Renaissance

medical text contends "the 'heat and moisture' arising from the production of semen" causes beard growth.<sup>[7]</sup> In other words, beards were a kind of "seminal excrement."<sup>[8]</sup>

For early modern men, beards served as a visible testament to their sexual potency. Accordingly, beards were seen as indicators of wisdom, privilege and power. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare writes: "He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man."<sup>[9]</sup> Here, the beard is explicitly equated with age and legitimate manhood as well as sexual prowess. The prevalence of beards in portraits, on the theatrical stage, and among the larger population may speak to a universal need among men to prove themselves virile and therefore appropriately masculine.

This insistent equation of true manhood with sexual performativity manifested itself in some extreme and perplexing ways in early modern society. Priests of the Roman Catholic Church, in order to qualify for service, had to have functional genitalia.<sup>[10]</sup> The fact that a group of men who were called to abstinence had to possess (the potential) ability to engage in intercourse shows that virility was not just a sexual concern: it was a social, political, and religious legitimizer. French essayist Michel de Montaigne reinforces this association between genitalia and manhood and power when he writes, in reference to his penis, "Every one of my members, even as much as another, makes me myself: and none makes me more properly a man than that one."<sup>[11]</sup> Historian Michael Rocke notices another strange male behavior related to the importance of sexual potency. He argues that men were so desperate to prove themselves virile they would gang rape women in order to demonstrate their sexual power to each other.<sup>[12]</sup> These phenomena beg the question: why was sexual performance so connected to definitions of masculinity in the early modern era? The answer can be found in an exploration of the conditions of the early modern patriarchy.

In early modern society, marriage was an essential step for men in their ascension as respected and productive members of the patriarchal establishment. It is significant that the initial meaning of the term "husband" was "master of the house."<sup>[13]</sup> Marriage meant a shift from youth to adulthood, from dependency to independence and power, from journeyman to master tradesman. It was generally accepted that, "An unmarried man is but half a man,"<sup>[14]</sup> as marriage has a civilizing effect on the wanton desires of bachelors.<sup>[15]</sup> The role of husband legitimized and justified his privileged place in the public sphere, as husbands were required to provide financially for their families through "intermeddling" with other men."<sup>[16]</sup>

Marriage also granted men considerable power in their individual families. In Europe's largely hierarchal society, the organization of the family was meant to represent a microcosm of the state, with the husband acting as king unto his kingdom.<sup>[17]</sup> In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina rebukes two rebellious wives by insisting, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign."<sup>[18]</sup> As Katherina indicates, women and children were expected to obey and serve the head of the household. Anthony Fletcher writes that the family was intended to be "a school wherein the first

principles of government and subjection are learned."<sup>[19]</sup> Clearly, marriages and family life were the locus of reinforcement of hierarchical and patriarchal values.

However, none of the advantages of marriage were available to men without the capacity to engage in sexual intercourse. According to Genesis, "a marriage... does require the union of bodies, in order that the husband may make of her whom he weds bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh."<sup>[20]</sup> Both the Catholic and Protestant faiths insisted on the sexual consummation of a marriage, and failure to perform was one of very few credible grounds for annulment.<sup>[21]</sup> Sexual performance, therefore, was a necessary condition for marriage and in turn entrance into the privileged world of adult men.

In married life, a man's sexual prowess was not sufficiently demonstrated by the single and finite act of consummation. Men were in constant danger of having their power undermined by their wives' insinuations about their virility. Theological doctrine held that each husband had a "marriage debt" to their wives to satisfy their sexual needs.<sup>[22]</sup> A man's failure to fulfill his marital duties could result in humiliating recriminations. Impotence trials, in which wives applied for annulments on the grounds that their husbands could not perform sexually, were often very public and a great source of entertainment and amusement. According to Pierre Darmon, "'all and sundry ran as if on fire' to witness the proceedings"<sup>[23]</sup> and mocking poems were written about the men suspected of impotence.

Men in these situations were so eager to prove their sexual potency that they were willing to endure "trial by congress," in which witnesses observed a couple engage in coitus.<sup>[24]</sup> The desperation of these men is not surprising, keeping in mind the damage that could be done to one's masculine reputation if found impotent. Shakespeare's Iago reflects their anxiety when he declares, "he that filches from me my good name... makes me poor indeed."<sup>[25]</sup> This reference to poverty could be very literal, as the basis for early modern financial transactions was the quality of a man's reputation.<sup>[26]</sup> In a society where status was one's social currency, to be found impotent, and therefore "non-male," would be socially and politically catastrophic.

Cuckoldry was another way in which men lost power on the basis of presumed sexual deficiency. Adulterous wives, it was believed, only strayed because their husbands had not fulfilled their "marriage debt" sufficiently. According to one conduct book, a genre of literature intended to educate the reader in current social norms, "'the greatest part of the faults committed by wives in this age, take the beginning from the faults of their husbands, [as] he hath not used her [sexually] as he ought to have done."<sup>[27]</sup> If a man was cuckolded, it was seen as a sign that he had failed to maintain order in his household, which had ramifications for his social standing in every other part of his life.<sup>[28]</sup> For this reason, when Othello believes his wife has been adulterous, he cries out, "Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars... Farewell! Othello's occupation gone!"<sup>[29]</sup> He fears that his wife's adultery will cost him his honor and, thereby, his vocation as a military man. Montaigne, concurring with Othello, writes that, "hardly one [man] would not rather commit theft and sacrilege—or that his wife were a murderer

or a heretic—than to have her be no chaster than he is."<sup>[30]</sup> It is significant that Montaigne equates the crime of cuckoldry with violent crimes like murder.

Though men may have feared the power women had over them in marriage, it was a generally accepted biological fact that men were physically superior to women. According to Aristotle, man was the original or ideal form of human, and woman was a malformed version of man, or "a man hurt."<sup>[31]</sup> While Hamlet is famous for the line, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"<sup>[32]</sup> Shakespeare's Katherina more moderately and explicitly describes the female physique in the following way: "our bodies [are] soft, weak, and smooth, / Unapt to toil and trouble in the world."<sup>[33]</sup> By contrast, men are understood to be strong, hot-blooded and vital, and ideally suited to face the travails of the public sphere. According to this theory, patriarchy is the biologically legitimate form of political organization, as women are ill suited to civic life.

Despite the stark contrast between the perceived perfection of the male body and the flawed nature of the female, biological differences between the genders were understood to be "dangerously fluid."<sup>[34]</sup> Difference of gender was merely a matter of the proportions of the same four humors and bodily temperatures shared between men and women. Therefore, early moderns were open to the possibility of an individual physically changing gender. Montaigne recounts the tale of a shepherdess whose womb turned into a penis as it dropped out of her body while she jumped a fence.<sup>[35]</sup> The perceived small degree of biological difference between male and female threatened the justification of patriarchy on the grounds of male bodies being vastly superior to women's.

Given this threat, imperfections of any kind, including sexual dysfunction, could not be incorporated into the definition of manhood. If men were supposed to be physically "perfect," all imperfect and impotent men must be excluded from the privilege of being called male. It is for this reason that men with sexual problems, or "cold" dispositions, were equated with the feminine. In one medical text, these men are branded as having "'faltering tongues, a nice, soft, and womanish voice, weake, and feeble faculties of nature."<sup>[36]</sup> In this medical context, we can understand the gender assignments in the hermaphrodite cases to be on the basis of whether or not the individual had the necessary qualities of "perfection" to be called a man.

Aside from the demand that males be fully functional in every aspect, the act of penetration also served to reinforce the passivity of women in several crucial ways. Any assertive or provocative behavior on the part of the woman during intercourse was outlawed. The Catholic Church banned sex with women on top as it was "an 'unnatural' position considered emblematic of woman's usurpation... of male's superior status."<sup>[37]</sup> If we return to the hermaphrodite trials, it is significant to note that, in one case, a woman with a prolapsed, or protruding uterus, was declared a man, though she possessed every other feminine quality.<sup>[38]</sup> Though this woman could clearly not achieve the "erecting, entering, emitting" triumvirate, officials preferred to label her a man rather than believe that a woman possessed the power of

penetration. The use of the word power is apt, as early modern men clearly and deliberately used penetration as a tool and means of sexual domination.

In early modern popular culture, intercourse between men and women was often described in the same way: the man is the active figure, even the aggressor, while the woman is the figure of passivity or submission. Elizabeth Foyster notes that sex was often described in terms of male economic activity: "the pedlar will 'pound spice' and the tailor uses his 'piercing Bodkin.'" [39] In both of these scenarios, the female is being *acted on* by the male, rather than having any personal agency. Montaigne similarly argues that women are biologically designed to be passive. He concludes that, "whereas Nature has so arranged it that men's desires should declare themselves by physical projection, [women] are unsuited to making a display and [are] strictly defensive." [40] In *Romeo and Juliet*, Sampson claims that, "women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall." [41] The implication that women's place in the sexual act is one of confinement, reinforces the idea that penetration is about masculine dominance.

An analysis of the nature of early modern homosexuality can reveal much about the nature of heterosexual intercourse. Cristian Berco argues that in early modern Spain, with, "a social order whereby someone ruled and others deferred," [42] sodomy had more to do with power and dominance than homoeroticism. He contends that homosexual intercourse was used to establish the dominant and submissive roles in male relationships: "The active partner in sodomy, the penetrator, represented the dominator, the one who imposed his masculine will on an emasculated object of desire." [43] One can easily apply this dynamic to heterosexuality, and posit that penetration was used to show masculine dominance over women.

It appears that even the men involved in homosexual relationships projected the feminine role onto the figure being penetrated or passive. Couples played at being "married," with the penetrator being referred to as the "husband" and the penetrated as the "wife." [44] Sodomized men were insulted with traditionally female derogatory terms, like "whore" and "bitch," for being the passive figure in the homosexual relationship. [45] Additionally, in inquisitorial trials, testimonials often describe the homosexual act as using someone "as a woman." [46] Clearly, penetration for all sexualities was used as a form of domination, but the act of submission was particularly equated with the feminine.

What becomes apparent in an examination of the legal and social practices of masculine gender identification in the early modern period is the profound anxiety that surrounds the question of manhood. In the face of medical, religious and ontological uncertainty, early moderns endeavored to (violently) impose a fixed conception of manhood onto the unacceptably fluid realities of "lived" gender. Significantly, maleness was defined in terms of positive, "penetrative" action, specifically the functionality of the penis. This preoccupation with sexual capacity, or, in other words, the *efficacy* of the sex act, may be understood as a reaction against feelings of passivity or *inefficacy* prompted by the belief in an unknowable God and an uncertain universe. Given that man (both in the human and gendered sense) was regarded in the Bible and popular culture as essentially the base unit of existence

writ large, it is unsurprising that early moderns wished to assert the perfection and performative value of the male and of humanity as a whole.

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[1] Edward Behrend-Martinez, "Manhood and the Neutered Body in Early Modern Spain," *Journal of Social History* 38: 4 (Summer 2005): 1073. ProjectMUSE (accessed 10 January 2011).

[2] Cathy McClive, "Masculinity on Trial: Penises, Hermaphrodites and the Uncertain Male Body in Early Modern France," *History Workshop Journal* 68 (Autumn 2009): 46. ProjectMUSE (accessed 9 January 2011).

[3] *Ibid.*, 57.

[4] *Ibid.*, 54-55.

[5] *Ibid.*, 45.

[6] *Ibid.*, 64.

[7] Will Fisher, "The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54:1 (Spring 2001): 174. JSTOR (accessed 10 January 2011).

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 2 Scene 1, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, (London: Abbey Library, 1974), 128.

[10] Pierre Darmon, *Damning the Innocent: A History of the Persecution of the Impotent in Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 2.

[11] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 317.

[12] Michael Rocke, "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender in Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds., by Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, (New York: Longman, 1998), 164.

[13] Behrend-Martinez, "Manhood and the Neutered Body", 1077.

[14] Elizabeth Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England* (New York: Longman, 1999), 36.

[15] Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 77.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 205.

[18] Shakespeare, *Taming of the Shrew*, Act 5, Scene 2, ed. Brian Morris (Methuen Press, 1982), 22.

- [19] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, 205.
- [20] Darmon, *Damning the Innocent*, 7.
- [21] Behrend-Martinez, "Manhood and the Neutered Body", 1077
- [22] Rocke, "Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," 155.
- [23] Darmon, *Damning the Innocent*, 78.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 5.
- [25] Shakespeare, *Othello* Act 3, Scene 3, in *Complete Works*, 931.
- [26] Christopher R. Corley, "On the Threshold: Youth as Arbiters of Space in Early Modern France," *Journal of Social History* 43: 1 (Fall 2009): 143. ProjectMUSE (accessed 20 February 2011)
- [27] Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*, 67.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 66.
- [29] Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 3, in *Complete Works*, 933.
- [30] de Montaigne, *The Essays*, 285.
- [31] Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 47.
- [32] Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act 1, Scene 2, in *Complete Works*, 849.
- [33] Shakespeare, *Taming of the Shrew*, Act 5, Scene 2, 23.
- [34] Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, 33.
- [35] *Ibid.*, 38.
- [36] Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 59.
- [37] Rocke, "Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," 167.
- [38] McClive, "Masculinity on Trial," 61.
- [39] Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*, 73.
- [40] de Montaigne, *The Essays*, 314.
- [41] Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* Act 1, Scene 1, *Complete Works*, 744.
- [42] Cristian Berco, "Producing Patriarchy: Male Sodomy and Gender in Early Modern Spain," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17:3 (September 2008): 356. ProjectMUSE (accessed 10 January 2011).
- [43] *Ibid.*, 358.
- [44] *Ibid.*, 360.
- [45] Rocke, "Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," 167.

[\[46\]](#) Berco, "Producing Patriarchy," 371.

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