The Whig Interpretation of Masculinity? Honour and Sexuality in Late Medieval Manhood[1]

by Christopher Fletcher

I.

Recently, the history of masculinity has encountered a general problem which has often arisen in the study of past societies. A number of commentators have drawn attention to the difficulty of reconciling modern categories of analysis with the cultural concepts of their object of study.[2] Two divergent tendencies have been identified in the study of masculinity. Some writers, it has been suggested, have favoured a sociologically informed approach, taking their agenda from modern social theory, whilst others have followed a primarily cultural historical method, focusing their efforts on the explication of contemporary structures of ideas.[3] A certain dissatisfaction with the 'linguistic turn' in historical studies has arguably contributed to focusing criticism on the second of these two perspectives, in that a primary cultural approach might be accused of reducing lived social realities to just so much discourse.[4] Weighing up these two tendencies, commentators on recent developments in both history and ethnography have expressed similar dissatisfactions, invoking the need for a primarily sociological perspective to enable broad comparisons over time,[5] or noting the limitations of 'symbolic' studies which are 'often remarkable, but partial'.[6]

In truth, this tension between sociological and cultural perspectives is nothing new, especially when it is the work of historians which is at issue. On the one hand, historians have always asked questions about past societies because these questions seem interesting to them. Since

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[1]   Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Leeds IMC, the Cambridge Historical Society, Southampton University and Birkbeck College, London. I am indebted to the audiences on each of these occasions, and to Ewan Johnson, David Pratt, Leonie Hicks, John Arnold and Sean Brady for the opportunity to explore these issues.

[2]   Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, 'What have historians done with masculinity? Reflections on five centuries of British History, circa 1500 to 1950', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 274-80.

[3]   Harvey and Shepard, 'What have historians done?', p. 276. For similar remarks concerning 'materialist' or 'symbolic' approaches to masculine domination in ethnography, see Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine* (Paris, 2002), p. 13.

[4]   Joan Hoff, 'Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis', *Women's History Review,* 3 (1994), 149-168. For a more moderate view, see Elizabeth A. Clark, 'The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the "Linguistic Turn" ', *Church History*, 67 (1998), 1-31.

[5]   John Tosh, 'Masculinities in Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 330-42, pp. 330-1, 342.

[6]   Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*, p. 13.

the mid twentieth century, it has seemed natural to draw on modern ideas about similar questions where these are available, whether that involve drawing on philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology or cultural studies. Yet at the same time, historians have always found it difficult to ignore that past actors had their own ideas and priorities. Sometimes their concerns seem tantalizingly close to our own. On other occasions they seem quite different, even disconcertingly alien. Both sociological and cultural historical perspectives bring their own characteristic dangers if pursued exclusively. How do we keep in mind the ideas of contemporaries without losing sight of why we became interested in a certain set of questions in the first place? Or, again: how do we make sure we are studying something we are interested in, without reducing the society under study to a mere illustration of our own pre-existing categories of analysis?

As the history of masculinity begins to negotiate these familiar problems, it seems worth considering how older historical sub-disciplines have dealt with them in the past, with what successes and what failures. For late medieval historians, the classic example of the second trap – what can go wrong with an unreflectively diachronic perspective – is well known under the title of 'the Whig interpretation of history'. As Herbert Butterfield saw it, the Victorians and their Edwardian successors had been guilty of writing history, and especially the history of English political institutions, to present a narrative of political progress whose apogee was themselves.[7] This excessively present-centred approach distorted their account of the past, forming part of an ideological proof that the late-nineteenth or early twentieth-century Englishman lived in the best of all possible political worlds.[8] In the course of the twentieth century, inspired by Butterfield and others, a radical critique unfolded which gradually undermined almost every received truth about late medieval politics. In some regards, this critique took a materialist form, in that it placed new stress on the material interests which underlay the actions of the nobility or gentry.[9] In other ways, it could be regarded as cultural

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[7]   Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931).

[8]   For comment on the origins of this distaste, given Butterfield's own grand historical projects, see Stefan Collini, 'Whigissimo', *London Review of Books,* 27:14 (21 July 2005).

[9]   For a combative summary of early developments, see K.B. McFarlane, 'An Early Paper on Crown and Parliament in the Later Middle Ages' in his *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 279-97. For a sample of studies focused on noble interests see, for example, J.R. Maddicott, *Thomas of Lancaster, 1307-1322: A study in the reign of Edward II* (London, 1970); Anthony Goodman, *The loyal conspiracy: The Lords Appellant under Richard II* (London, 1971); R.A. Griffiths, 'Local rivalries and national politics: the Percies, the Nevilles and the Duke of Exeter, 1452-55', *Speculum,* 43 (1968), 589-632. For studies of gentry society see, for example, Nigel Saul, *Knights and esquires: The Gloucestershire gentry in the fourteenth century* (Oxford, 1981); M.J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, 1983); Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: a study of Warwickshire landed society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge, 1992).

historical in focus, placing renewed stress on how contemporaries perceived the political institutions in which earlier historians had found the roots of English liberty.[10]

The anti-Whig assault on present-centred accounts of late medieval political culture had a number of virtues, in that it yielded a more accurate picture of past societies. But it also brought with it a number of negative consequences, especially the risk of losing the bigger picture. A purely historicist approach risked losing sight of why historians had become interested in all this in the first place.[11] Only in recent years have historians been able to fight their way out of this historiographical quagmire to give a broader perspective on the development of the late medieval state and the way this interacted both with existing culture and with longer term social and political changes.[12] They have been able to do so by pursuing an approach which combines an analysis of contemporary language and assumptions with an awareness of the force of the material considerations which arose from the nature of social organisation.

The long-term historiography of English governmental institutions holds lessons for newer disciplines, such as the history of masculinity, which are just embarking on similar journeys. Like English constitutional history, the history of masculinity came into existence because it was found interesting both for reasons within academia and because of broader social developments. It made it possible to pursue the implications of the advances made in the study of women's history beyond that academic sub-discipline. It also sought to address problems still faced by feminism in the West once women had obtained formal rights in the political, economic and reproductive domain. It offered the possibility of exploring the more subtle forms of subjection which persist after formal legal freedoms have been established. One of the central aims of this project was consciousness raising. A historical perspective offered a way to demonstrate that the socially accepted qualities of adult males, just like those

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[10]   The early attacks of H.G. Richardson and G.O. Sayles on the significance of the Commons in parliament are brought together in Sayles, *The King's Parliament of England* (London, 1975). For a more moderate view, see J.W. McKenna, 'The Myth of Parliamentary Sovereignty in Late Medieval England', *English Historical Review*, 94 (1979), 481-506 and the remarks of McFarlane, 'Early paper', pp. 287-94.

[11]   See Christine Carpenter, 'Political and constitutional history: before and after McFarlane' in R.H. Britnell and A.J. Pollard (eds.), *The McFarlane Legacy: studies in late medieval politics and society* (Stroud and New York, 1995); Edward Powell, 'After "After McFarlane": The poverty of patronage and the case for constitutional history' in *Ibid*.

[12]   G.L. Harriss, *Shaping the Nation: England 1360-1461* (Oxford, 2005); Jean-Philippe Genet, *La genèse de l'Etat moderne: Culture et société politique en Angleterre* (Paris, 2003); W.M. Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England, 1300-1450* (London, 1995); Simon Walker, *Political Culture in Later Medieval England*, ed. M. Braddick (Manchester, 2006); and in European perspective: John Watts, *The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300-1500* (Cambridge, 2009).

of women, had varied over time.[13] Since masculine roles are particular and changing characteristics of particular societies, and not biologically determined universals, they might be reformable in the present day. At the very least, the exposure of the historical particularity of past gendered orders would make it possible to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of current arrangements.

Just as in the early days of English constitutional history, the agenda for the history of masculinity has been set by the interests of its day. Now, this is all very right and proper. It would be a perverse history which only asked questions which were of no interest to those living at the time of writing.[14] It could also very rightly be pointed out that Victorian and Edwardian accounts of medieval political institutions were *unreflectively* conditioned by the priorities of those who wrote them, whereas the history of masculinity is far more self-conscious. This field has if anything been characterised by an explosion of theoretically elaborated approaches.[15] Nonetheless, I would suggest that this very burgeoning of theoretical perspectives has sometimes allowed unstated assumptions to return by the back door. As the history of masculinity cut its teeth, the multiplicity of approaches pursued was arguably conducive to creative innovation.[16] As this sub-discipline nears maturity, it is the drawbacks of this diversity which have come to the fore. Too often, the modern connotations of 'masculinity' – notably its primary association with sexuality – have served as an unacknowledged organising schema, conveniently linking a wide variety of fields without the reasons for this association always being clear.

Butterfield argued that it was in the composition of a general synthesis that the greatest dangers lay in store for even the most rigorous of scholars, especially as they strove to present

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[13]   Joan Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053-75; Alan J. Frantzen, 'When Women Aren't Enough', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 445-71; Clare A. Lees, 'Introduction' to *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis and London, 1994).
[14]   Quentin Skinner, 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and *The Practice of History*', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 7 (1997), 301-16.
[15]   This is not least because much early work on medieval masculinity has emerged in the form of closely focused case studies, producing many overlapping insights but no clear consensus as to the core object of study. The variety of approaches can be sampled from the contributions to Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities*; D.M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999); J.J. Cohen and B. Wheeler (eds.), *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1997); Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York, 1999); P.H. Cullum and Katherine Lewis (eds.), *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Cardiff, 2004). For an attempt at a broad categorisation of current approaches to medieval masculinity, see Christopher Fletcher, *Richard II: Manhood, youth, and politics, 1377-1399* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 4-5.
[16]   See e.g. the sanguine remarks of Peter G. Beidler, 'Introduction' to Beidler (ed.) *Masculinities in Chaucer* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1-5.

detailed empirical work to a wider audience.[17] When Ruth Mazo Karras undertook the first, pioneering general synthesis dedicated to the history of medieval masculinity, she faced a particularly virulent form of this general problem. How to present in a single survey such a variety of approaches, whose common themes, or even broad outlines, had yet to emerge clearly? The imposition of an overarching theoretical framework might fulfil this role, but could it succeed in imposing unity on such diverse material?

In the first work to take on the theme of medieval masculinity with comprehensiveness as a goal, Karras thus began by setting out an approach which draws on the work of the sociologist R.W. Connell.[18] The method initially advanced is consequently a socially constructivist one, intended to demonstrate how society 'shaped roles and defined norms for men' in a variety of social groups, just as it did for women.[19] This approach makes it possible to divide up current research by social group, between the nobility, the university and the towns. Nonetheless, despite this theoretical framework, it proves difficult to maintain this unity as the argument proceeds.

The difficulty of reconciling the diverse conceptions of masculinity inherent in early work on medieval masculinity becomes clear, for example, in a consideration of the masculinity of late medieval university students. In the course of this discussion, the theoretical underpinning of each subsection necessarily bends to accommodate the varied agenda which early historians of masculinity have brought to a consideration of this social group. Initially, the method pursued is close to that of the anthropologist David Gilmore, focusing on how the status of an adult male is something which needs to be won, and is not just something which is conferred by reaching a certain age.[20] Masculinity is thus a matter of rites of passage and 'becoming' male (or at least becoming a 'man') in an investigation of how the norms of the university 'show how young men were expected to take up their masculine position in the world'.[21] But as the argument progresses, it proves difficult to maintain this single framework, as the focus moves to a second, distinct understanding of 'masculinity' – arguably the key one in recent discussions of medieval masculinity. Considering the sexual activities of students, Karras

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[17]   Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, e.g. pp. 5-6, 24, 28-9, 33.
[18]   R.M. Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 2003), p. 1. Cf. R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Oxford, 1987); Connell, *Masculinities* (Oxford, 1995).
[19]   *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[20]   David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven and London, 1990).
[21]   Karras, *Boys to Men*, p. 68.

maintains that the tolerance by the university authorities of sexual relations with certain 'sexually available' women amounted to the acceptance of activities necessary 'to demonstrate their assimilation into manhood';[22] and that there was an 'implicit charge of emasculation' always ready to fall on those who took up a life of chastity.[23] Yet in moving from male 'ways of life' and 'rites of passage' to male sexuality, sexual activity has been equated with adult-male status without an overt defence of this position. It is taken for granted, rather than argued, that maleness must be performed through heterosexual sex.

The sheer variety of approaches pursued by historians in considering even this relatively small social group becomes still more apparent as the discussion moves to a third approach of a more cultural historical kind, and it is argued that the symbolic combat of university disputation, with its use of military vocabulary, 'provided a forum for the demonstration of masculinity'.[24] Finally, Karras concludes with a fourth approach, in a discussion of the 'bonding mechanisms' by which students were initiated into the university community.[25] Thus, in bringing unity to the work of historians, diverse themes are necessarily grouped together, ranging from norms of social comportment and the attainment of adult-male status, to sexual activity, symbolic conflict in disputation, and bonding in a particular all-male social group. But it remains unclear how these different theoretical approaches relate to one another, nor how they relate to medieval cultural categories.[26] Even though a particular theoretical framework is staked out by way of introduction, it proves difficult to avoid falling back on less fully examined systems of association in the course of the argument.

The creative variety which proved so fruitful for the early development of the history of masculinity risks creating confusion as historians reach the level of synthesis. If we are to avoid presenting a Whig interpretation of masculinity, finding only reflections of ourselves in past culture, then social theory alone is not enough. Contrary to the order of priorities recommended by a number of recent commentators, there is still a need to begin with a cultural historical approach, and then move to our own questions. Only by looking at what past societies associated with being male can we hope to avoid organising the history of masculinity around what we have already decided its characteristics are likely to be. Only that

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[22]   *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[23]   *Ibid.*
[24]   *Ibid.*, p. 90.
[25]   *Ibid.*, pp. 95-100.

way can we avoid going round the houses which it has taken English political history nearly a century to negotiate.

II.

Having presented the problem in these terms, a central difficulty immediately arises, one associated with writing the history of masculinity before the eighteenth century. Put simply there was no word for it. [27] In English, for example, 'masculinity' is a rare term before this period, restricted to technical and grammatical contexts. To date, historians of masculinity have not generally regarded this lack of correspondence between medieval and modern categories as a very important difficulty. Instead, writers have tended to treat 'masculinity' and 'manhood' (which *was* a current term) as more or less equivalent. Now, if masculinity were something like population or iron production, something whose modern associations are well-established, unitary and not too controversial, then this would not present a problem. But the modern term 'masculinity' is not such a simple concept. It brings with it a nest of commonplace assumptions and a wide range of more self-conscious theoretical approaches whose relationship to one another is not always clear. Medieval manhood, meanwhile, is at least as complex and ramified in its associations as modern masculinity. These associations are not identical to those linked with masculinity in modern culture. Certainly, they often overlap, sometimes enough to make us think that we are dealing with very similar concepts, but this is not always the case.

In particular, the relationship between medieval manhood and sexuality is rather different from that suggested by the close association in the modern mind between masculinity and sexuality. Instead, the associations of 'manhood' are organised around strength, vigour, steadfastness and a certain kind of concern with status and honour, including largesse and conspicuous expenditure. [28] They only secondarily impinge on sexual activity. This should give pause before assuming that the associations between sexuality and male identity were the same in late medieval England, for example, as they are in the present day. In particular, it draws into question the approach taken by a number of commentators on the gender status of

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[26]   Christopher Fletcher, 'Manhood and politics in the reign of Richard II', *Past and Present*, 189 (2005), 3-39, pp. 13-14.
[27]   This difficulty is not restricted to pre-industrial England. See D.F. Janssen, 'Current Ethnohistories of Masculinity' in the present volume.
[28]   In addition to the material presented below, see Fletcher, *Richard II*, chs. 2-3.

the later medieval clergy, who have been regarded as a third sex, or even an 'emasculinity', on account of their exclusion from legitimate sexual activity.[29] On the contrary, I would suggest that because the logic of manhood was not organised around sexuality, but around strength and honour, it was relatively straightforward for the celibate clergy to redirect the values of manhood to a form of spiritual combat in which sin was the ultimate enemy to be fought.[30] Indeed, this tactic was so successful, that it was to enjoy a healthy afterlife in later lay forms of spirituality and correct moral life. Medieval laymen, also, were advised to show their manhood, in contrast to youths, women and the pursuit of mere worldly honour, by seeking to win salvation in the next life through the fight against sin.

I would suggest that, contrary to what is often assumed, abstinence from sex need not have impeded the self-identification of medieval men as men. Abstinence from honour, however, was quite another matter. This is not to say that the insistence of the Church on clerical celibacy from the eleventh century onwards did not present difficulties for male clergy,[31] or for devout laymen. It is clear that sexual desire was a quality seen to be inherent in the human body which could be fought by self-imposed bodily suffering, resisted by will, or expunged by mystical deliverance – even by a kind of metaphysical castration.[32] Nonetheless, these problems were related to embodiment (both male and female) in a way which was not as directly linked to 'manhood' in medieval language and commonplace assumptions as modern masculinity is to sexuality. Certainly both men and women were considered to possess lustful bodies, and this was sometimes dealt with by appeal to a military metaphor, perhaps more characteristically for men than for women.[33] Certainly young men especially (and women of all ages) were assumed to be vulnerable to sexual sin, not least because they lacked the

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[29]   The coinage is that of R.W. Swanson, 'Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation', in Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. A similar assumption is evident throughout recent work which approaches the insistence on clerical celibacy through the danger this is held to pose, in an implicit psychoanalytic framework, to male identity, notably: Jo Ann McNamara, 'The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150' in Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities*.
[30]   See Jacqueline Murray, 'Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle of Chastity and Monastic Identity' in Cullum and Lewis (eds.), *Holiness and Masculinity*. An excellent summary of the tradition of spirtual combat upto the twelfth century is provided by Katherine Allen Smith, 'Saints in Shining Armour: Martial Asceticism and Masculine Models of Sanctity, ca. 1050-1250', *Speculum*, 83 (2008), 572-602, pp. 576-82.
[31]   P.H. Cullum, 'Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression' in Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*; Cullum, 'Learning to be a man, learning to be a priest in late medieval England' in Sarah Rees Jones (ed.), *Learning and literacy in medieval England and abroad* (Turnhout, 2003).
[32]   John Arnold, 'The Labour of Continence: Masculinity and Virginity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century' in Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (eds.), *Medieval Virginities* (Cardiff, 2003); Jacqueline Murray, ' "The law of sin that is in my members": the problem of male embodiment' in Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (eds.), *Gender and Holiness: Men and Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe* (London, 2002).
[33]   Smith, 'Saints in Shining Armour', p. 595; Murray, 'Masculinizing Religious Life'.

strength and constancy of mature men.[34] But we need to acknowledge that there is an important difference between our classification of sexuality, when it involves men, as being 'masculinity', and the rather different associations of contemporary 'manhood', notably with personal honour and status, and with strength and fighting. Although we can observe that there was implicitly accepted in the Middle Ages that it was natural for human bodies to be lustful from the age of puberty onwards, and although we can note the male-gendered nature of the spiritual combat by which this threat might be overcome, it is worth observing that, for medieval people at least, the (military) solution was more explicitly labelled as 'manly' than the (sexual) problem it purported to solve, however odd this might seem to the modern observer.

It is worth considering why it has seemed self-evident to scholars that warfare was the 'quintessential masculine activity' in the Middle Ages, or what it means to say that 'the ideal lay male body was above all the body of the knight'.[35] This has tended to be regarded as the consequence of the dominance of medieval society by the military class,[36] and it would certainly seem wrong to deny that this dominance played its role. That said, medieval manhood was not simply a matter of downward cultural diffusion. The links of manhood with honour, strength and constancy had deeper roots, which predated this dominance, and which would long outlive it. The association between manhood and warfare appears 'quintessential' not only as a result of the importance of the lay nobility as 'those who fight', but also because of the well established nature in medieval language and culture of the association between men and a form of quasi-military honour. To develop these remarks more fully, the remainder of this article will explore what happens if we come from the opposite direction from that pursued even in studies which integrate sociological and cultural historical approaches to the history of masculinity. What happens if we start with the medieval language of manhood, and then consider how this fits in with modern ideas of masculinity, rather than taking modern social theory as the starting point of our inquiry?

III.

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[34]   Fletcher, *Richard II*, ch. 4.
[35]   Megan McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe', *Women's Studies*, 17 (1990), p. 194; A. Dunlop, 'Masculinity, Crusading and Devotion: Francesco Casali's Fresco in the Trecento Perugian *Contado*', *Speculum*, 76 (2001), 315-336, p. 328.

We can begin with what is now becoming quite a famous milestone in the history of masculinity, one which seems to take us to the core territory of this subject area – namely, sexuality – but which on closer inspection is revealed to relate to manhood in quite a different way. This fine example of the interaction of commonplace assumptions about manhood with a rather surprising set of social circumstances was brought to light some years ago by Richard Helmholz.[37] It occurs in the course of a discussion of the procedure for marriage annulment on the grounds of the man's impotence. It appears that the ecclesiastical courts of the archdiocese of York would, if it came to that, recruit seven women to verify that a man really was impotent. Their testimony provides a fascinating account of what certain fifteenth-century 'honest women' believed would stand up in court, as it were, when it came to testing male sexual capacity.[38]

In July 1432, John Skathelok was examined by Joan Semer in the presence of six other 'honest women'.

> 'The same witness exposed her naked breasts, and with her hands warmed at the said fire, she held and rubbed the penis and testicles of the said John. And she embraced and frequently kissed the same John, and stirred him up in so far as she could to show his virility and potency (*virilitatem et potentiam suam*), admonishing him that for shame he should show then and there and prove and render himself a man (*probaret et redderet se virum*).'[39]

I would like to draw out two things which have so far been neglected in commentary on this episode. First, there is the question of heat and the fire. Second, what seems the most surprising part of this procedure: that the women in question (at least for the sake of a church

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[36]   See e.g. Karras, *Boys to Men*, p. 108; Smith, 'Saints in Shining Armour', p. 595; Dunlop, 'Masculinity, Crusading', pp. 317, 328.

[37]   R.M. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 89. Further discussed by Jacqueline Murray, 'On the origins and role of "wise women" in causes for annulment on the grounds of male impotence', *Journal of Medieval History*, 16 (1990), 235-49, pp. 240-1.

[38]   It seems that the women were, in fact, known to the court as prostitutes, although this is not mentioned in the trial record itself. See P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Women in Fifteenth-Century Town Life' in *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. John A.F. Thompson (Gloucester, 1988), p. 119, n. 128; R.M. Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford, 1996), p. 97.

[39]   'Ipsa iurata ostendebat mammillas suas denudates ac manibus suis ad dictam ignem calefacis virgam et testiculos dicti Johannis palpavit et tenuit ac eundem Johannem amplexabatur et sepius osculabatur ac eundem Johannem ad ostendum virilitatem et potentiam suam in quantum potuit excitauit, precipiendo sibi quod pro pudore tunc ibidem probaret et redderet se virum.' in Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, p. 89. For fuller translated extracts of the proceedings see *Women in England, c. 1275-1525*, trans. and ed. P.J.P.Goldberg (Manchester, 1995), pp. 217-22.

court deposition) seemed to believe that taunting a man to show his manhood would somehow cure his impotence.

The first of these procedures, quite apart from its potential practical efficacy, may bear witness to contemporary medical ideas about manhood, ideas which by the fourteenth-century had spread beyond the university to influence popular conceptions of the operation of the human body. Heat was a characteristic of manhood, which bore witness to the more efficient functioning of a mature, male organism by comparison with that of women, children and old men.[40] This heat, the product of the correct coction of humours, produced the vigour of the organism in question.[41] Nonetheless, in the context of an impotence trial, it might be thought (reasonably enough) that the attention to heat and manipulation were simply a sensible way to go about resolving the problem in question. What is rather more surprising is the final method which the 'honest women' deployed, namely taunting: 'admonishing him that for shame he should then and there prove and render himself a man'. In fact, the logic of taunt and response which underlie this procedure, and in particular the demand for John to show himself a man, is tied to the deep involvement of the notion of manhood, not with sexuality, but with a system of honour, shame and vengeance. To explore further how this logic operated, it is necessary to put aside our own categories for a moment, and to pursue the medieval associations of 'manhood', as they are revealed by the use of language.

Perhaps the most closed and specific, but nonetheless characteristic uses of the substantive 'manhood' and the adverb 'manly' in late medieval England was to denote the actions of a man who has to act vigorously and steadfastly, especially to defend himself in a tight spot. These connotations were ancient ones, found also in the Latin 'viriliter', but they were retained and used with frequency in English.[42] So, for example, in an early fourteenth-century Middle English version of the romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*, the hero king shows might and energy in battle when he assaults a Sicilian town, and fights 'so manly' that none of his men perish:

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[40] Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Oxford, 1988), pp. 51, 59-60, 68, 117; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 52-3, 171-2, 181, 184-5.
[41] Fletcher, 'Manhood and politics', pp. 22-3; Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 62-7.
[42] Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 31-2. See also Rachel Stone, 'Masculinity without conflict: noblemen in eighth and ninth century Francia' in the present volume. I would suggest that there is considerable unity in the examples of acting *viriliter* which she furnishes, and a shared frame of reference with the examples given in the present article. In particular, manly action keeps the same reference to vigour and steadfastness, even when this

> And at the londe-gate Kynge Rycharde
>
> Helde his assawte ylyke harde,
>
> And so manly he toke one,
>
> He lost of his men neuer one.[43]

Such behaviour averts not only death, but also shame and subjection. Thus in one version of the romance of *Horn*, the hero's father, faced with the invading Irish, calls all who 'hold their land free' to fight, for it is

> Better manly to be slayn
>
> Than long to liue in sorwe & pain
>
> Oghain outlandis thede. [44]

'Manly' behaviour in contexts like these prevents shame and confirms the actor's status, often explicitly his status as a nobleman. In another example, this time in the mid-fourteenth-century alliterative romance *William of Palerne*, we see the king of Spain, overtaken by his enemies, addressing his knights. He tells them to defend themselves doughtily, or else they will die, that no profit lies in flight:

> 'And more mensk it is manliche to deie
>
> than for to fle couwardli, for ought that mai falle.'[45]

It seems that, as part of this system of associations, 'manhood' or 'manship' could serve as synonyms for honour or renown, what late medieval English speakers called 'worship'. 'Manhood' in this sense appears most often when it had to be defended with the swift taking of vengeance in the face of a slight, lest it be damaged by the presumption of the enemy. So when William himself addresses the same troops before they ride out to battle, he appeals to their 'manship' and for the need to act 'manly', saying:

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behaviour is invoked, for example, in the pursuit of reform or the defence of the Church. Compare the semantic field of *virtus* and *viriliter* in classical Latin, discussed in the works cited below, n. 50.

[43] *Der Mittelenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz*, ed. K. Brunner, Wiener Beitrage zur Englischen Philologie 42 (Vienna and Leipzig, 1913), ll. 1908-12: ('And at the land-gate King Richard held the assault so hard, and acted so manly, that he lost not one of his men.')

[44] *Horn Childe and Maiden Rimnild*, ed. M. Mills (Heidelberg, 1988), ll. 166-8. ('Better manly to be slain than long to live in sorrow and pain under a foreigner's yoke.')

> 'Men, for youre manchipe, namore that suffreth,
>
> but wendeth ought wightli and with your fon meteth![46]

and:

> 'Yif ye manli with hem mete, the maistry worth oure
>
> theighh thei be five so fele as we in fere alle.'[47]

These recurrent scenes appeal to the basic physical vigour, and the refusal of shameful inaction, which underlay the use of the language of manhood. The martial associations of this terminology have a tendency to arise even when they are not strictly relevant, for example in a context in which the meaning of 'man' is at first sight simply 'adult'. Thus in the late romance *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, the hero is separated from his son, Degrebelle, who is raised by the king of Israel. When Eglamour subsequently defeats his unrecognised son, and is then apprised of his identity, he declares to the king of Israel:

> 'Lord,' he said, 'God foryelde thee!   [i.e. God grant you]
> thou hast hym broghte to man.'[48]   [var: 'made hym a manne']

On one level, the king is simply being congratulated for having brought up Degrebelle to the age of adulthood, but the context also suggests that the inculcation of knightly virtues and prowess have played no small part in bringing him to be a man. In this passage, there seems to be more to being made a 'man' than the simple passage of years. More than just adulthood, it also seems to denote a certain status, and certain specific qualities, which a man ought to show to win and maintain his 'manhood'.

Returning to the York bedroom scene with these associations in mind, the taunts of the 'honest women' start to make more sense. It seems that the associations of manhood with strength and honour were so well established in late medieval culture that they could pass

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[45]   *William of Palerne*, ed. G.J.V. Bunt (Gröningen, 1985), ll. 3900-3901. ('And it is more noble to die manly than to flee cowardly, whatever may happen.')

[46]   *William*, ll. 3337-8: ('Men, for your manship, suffer this no more, but go out valiantly and meet your foes!')

[47]   *William*, ll. 3341-2. ('If you meet with them manly, the mastery will be ours.')

[48]   *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, ed. F.E. Richardson, EETS 256 (London, 1965), ll. 1315-17 (Lincoln Cathedral Library 91 of c.1430-40, the 'Thornton' MS). Variant from BL Cotton Caligula A.II (c.1446-60).

from this realm into that of sexuality, without practical experience exposing the absurdity of this transference. Since 'manhood' was the status of an adult male, which was defended above all by vigorous, violent reaction to a potential shame, then it was simple enough to follow a similar logic in the sexual domain. If manly action was above all vigorous action in a tight spot and in response to a taunt, then taunting might seem a rational way to go about inspiring a suitably manly reaction even in the sex of an impotent man.

IV.

The importance of the values of strength, steadfastness and honour in the logic of manhood gives reason to reconsider the prominence which has been given to sexuality in recent discussions of medieval masculinity. This impression hardens when it is considered that it was these associations, more than any link to sexual activity, which served to link the diverse areas which late medieval culture associated with the status of a 'man'. Far from the context of cures for impotence, the pursuit of manhood as honour figured as a struggle with sin, a kind of conquest of the impulses of pride, the body and the world. As with the vocabulary of manhood itself, the roots of the metaphor of manly combat against the assaults of the devil ran back to the early Christian church,[49] and further back into the promptness with military metaphor of Roman culture in general and the Latin language in particular.[50] But, again, as with the associations of the language of manhood itself, these themes were also very much alive in late medieval England, adapted to a very different social and cultural atmosphere. Particularly interesting is the extension of this metaphor, in which it is not just that fighting sin might be characterised as 'manly', but that this spiritual battle leads to the accumulation of renown or 'manhood' of a kind which is analogous with the worldly honour of the battlefield, even as it claims to supersede it.

Take, for example, a didactic poem composed by one William Shoreham, vicar of Chart-Sutton, in the first half of the fourteenth-century.[51] The aim of this poem is to prove in common sense terms that Creation was clearly willed and done by God. This leads on to the problem of evil, for Shoreham asserts that the Almighty did not create evil, although He did

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[49] See Smith, 'Saints in Shining Armour', pp. 576-82; Murray, 'Masculinizing the Religious Life'.
[50] Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The fire in the bones* (Berkeley and London, 2001), esp. pp. 36-42; Myles McDonnell, *Roman manliness: virtus and the Roman republic* (Cambridge, 2006).
[51] *The Poems of William of Shoreham*, ed. M. Konrath, Early English Texts Society, old series 86 (London, 1902), no. 7.

permit evil to come into existence. In seeking to explain why this should be the case, Shoreham deploys the values of manhood to provide an explanation for the role of evil in the scheme of world salvation. Why did God allow evil to come into existence? Well, the answer runs, the first thing that God created was heaven, which was made in such a fashion that every kind of bliss would be fulfilled in it. Now, if you receive advancement through a gift meant for you, then you are very happy; if you find yourself the heir of a large and fair kingdom, you are even happier. Yet none of this, Shoreham holds, can be superior to the joy of conquest through God:

> Ac nys no blysse ne no feste
> Agheyns the ioye of conqueste
> Thet hys thorgh god;
> Ne mey me more ioye aspye,
> Thane wanne a man thorgh mestrye
> Keth hys manhod.[52]

Evil thus exists so that men can make the joy of heaven complete by winning the manhood – that is renown and honour as well as the status of a man – which comes with victory and conquest. Since no conquest can come about without strife, thus God suffers evil to exist. For if there were no evil, there would be no strife, nor victory, and so heaven would lack that glory.

A similar logic, in which the associations of manhood are taken up in the steadfastness required for the fight against sin, leading to a kind of spiritual renown, occurs scattered through late medieval preaching. Thomas Brinton, for example, bishop of Rochester from 1373 to 1389, made much use of the metaphor of manly combat against personified sin. In one sermon, he incites his audience to combat the devil, the flesh and the world, saying:

> 'But in what way were we revived and nourished alike through faith? Certainly in three ways. By overcoming manly three kingdoms, that is of the devil, of the flesh and of the world.'[53]

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[52]   *Ibid.*, ll. 349-54: ('And there is no bliss nor celebration to compare with the joy of conquest that comes through God; nor can I conceive of more joy than when a man proves his manhood through mastery.')
[53]   *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373-1389)*, ed. M.A. Devlin, Camden Soc. 3rd ser. 85 (London, 1934), sermon 37, p. 106: 'Sed quomodo per fidem sumus recreati pariter et nutriti? Certe

On another occasion, Brinton urged on a clerical audience the example of another manly defender of the church, St Thomas of Canterbury. The words of the theme 'laus eius in ecclesia' ('his praise/renown in the church') might be appropriately applied, Brinton argued, to Thomas. For:

'The fresh memory of the just man comforts us so that we imitate him manly, "because of his renown".' [54]

Thomas Becket's *laus* – the praise of him, his reputation, or even his chivalric renown – inspire us to imitate him 'manly'. In Brinton's sermon, it is implied that if we keep the praise Thomas has won in our minds, like the deeds of some exemplary knight, we can undertake the hard path before us. As in Shoreham's poem, Becket's manly battle against the forces of the devil leads to the accumulation of a fund of merit, just as in romance texts manly deeds led to the accumulation of manhood, meaning honour and renown. Like earlier hagiography and monastic devotion, these sermons and devotional texts do not attack the cult of manhood head on, nor seek to undermine the worth of knightly honour, but instead take up the values of manhood with enthusiasm in their effort to direct its emotionally stirring potential towards spiritual ends.

To an extent it is tempting to dismiss the trope of spiritual combat and its resulting heavenly renown as a piece of clerical special pleading, a rather contrived attempt to convince men that they can be men by fighting, not their neighbours in a county community or their opponents in war, but those truly more dangerous enemies, the devil, the flesh and the world. We might wonder if everyone was as convinced by this argument as Brinton and Shoreham apparently were. But it should be noted that the fundamental markers of masculine worth which the proponents of a more clerical lifestyle felt the need to accommodate are not organised around the expression of masculinity through sexual activity, but are based on the demonstration of manhood by physical violence in the face of shame.

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tripliciter. Tria regna videlicet diaboli, carnis, et mundi viriliter superando.' Cf. *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. and trans. S. Wenzel (London, 1989), pp. 40-3. Compare also the examples from the 11th and 12th century cited by Smith, 'Saints in Shining Armour', pp. 591-2.

[54]   *Ibid.*, p. 121: 'Viri iusti recens memoracio nos comfortat vt eum viriliter imitemur, *quia laus eius.*'

It is clear, moreover, that rhetorical tactics similar to those used by Shoreham and Brinton enjoyed popularity not just in the writings of late medieval preachers, but in the works of devout laymen also. Similar strategies, although without an overt use of the language of manhood, are found, for example, in a prose treatise known as the *Two Ways* composed by Sir John Clanvowe probably sometime in the late 1380s and certainly before his death on crusade in about 1391.[55] The 'Two Ways' in question are, respectively, the broad way which leads to hell, and the narrow way that leads to salvation. In order to follow the narrow way, we must first pass through the narrow gate which leads to it. This gate is guarded by three strong enemies that we must fight in order to enter.[56] These enemies turn out to be our old friends, the devil, the flesh and the world.[57] This battle is hard, but we are aided in our efforts by the example of the saints of heaven who have passed by the gate in spite of these enemies. 'And therefore, it is a great shame to us, and endless harm, unless we hold the way after those saints'.[58] Then, in perhaps the most famous passage of *The Two Ways*, Clanvowe turns in detail to 'the worships of this wretched world'.[59] If we are well advised we will know that they are not really 'worships'. Before God, such things are neither riches nor 'worships' 'for before God all virtue is worship and all sin is shame'. In this world, Clanvowe claims, the reverse is true, for the world holds them to be 'worshipful' who are great warriors and destroy and win many lands, and waste and give to those who have enough, and spend outrageously in food, and drink, in clothing and building and living in ease, sloth and other sins. Vengeance too is rewarded by the world, for 'the world worships them much who are avenged proudly and without pity for every wrong that is said or done to them. And of such men, folk make books and songs and read and sing of them to hold in mind their deeds the longer here on earth. For worldly men desire greatly that their name might last long here on earth. But whatever the world might think about such men, they are judged 'right shameful before God and all the company of heaven', for before them all sin is shame and 'unworship'.[60]

Again, there is nothing very new in what Clanvowe says.[61] But once more this ought to sharpen our awareness of the deep currency and import of such views, not blunt it. The

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[55]   'The Two Ways' in *The Works of Sir John Clanvowe*, ed. V.J. Scattergood (Cambridge, 1975).
[56]   Clanvowe, 'The Two Ways', ll. 169-71.
[57]   *Ibid.,* ll. 174-6. Here and below the modernisation is my own.
[58]   *Ibid.*, ll. 191-3: 'And, therfore, it is greete schame to vs and eendelees harme also but yef we holden the wey after thoo seyntes'.
[59]   See especially K.B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 201-205.
[60]   *Ibid.*, ll. 477-503.
[61]   One might also compare the remarks made by Alfred the Great in his translation of Boethius concerning the misleading nature of worldly riches, although the military metaphor is absent from Alfred's

constantly present military metaphor in Clanvowe's text appeals to the deeply held assumption that physical courage, in defence, and in a good cause, is in itself desirable. Even in the moralised world of the *Two Ways*, the good deeds of virtue still lead to a form of honour analogous to chivalric honour. The social approbation or condemnation of the knight's peers are simply replaced by the opinion of 'God and all the company of heaven'. That he chose to support such views with liberal use of a ninth-century model emphasizes their continuing currency, just as the affection for 'manly' fighting in a tight spot marks romance writers' awareness of the links of such activity both with an ancient heritage and with what current linguistic usage took to be a 'man'.

V.

If we put aside for a moment the associations suggested by modern concepts of masculinity, and place the focus of inquiry on medieval manhood instead, then although similar themes do sometimes emerge, it begins to become apparent that a different order of priorities pertains than now operates in modern concepts of masculinity. Although sexuality is undeniably present amongst the associations of manhood, it most often seems to be a secondary phenomenon. It is not central in the same way that sexuality lies at the hub of modern concepts of masculinity. Instead, strength, personal honour and a kind of reactive vigour appear to be the organising concepts of manhood. Consequently, to invoke these values in a sexual context could be just as much a matter of transferral or redeployment as the invocation of manly action in the context of spiritual combat.

This invites a reassessment of how historians have approached late medieval masculinity, and above all the masculinity of the clergy.[62] If what was most important to manhood was less sex than honour, strength and steadfastness, how might this affect accounts of changing ideals of manhood, particularly with the insistence on clerical celibacy which gained pace from the eleventh century? Might the attempt to appropriate the values of manhood and redirect them to the battle against sin represent an attempt not (or not mainly) to reconcile aristocratic males to an abandonment of sexual activity (and hence masculinity) but instead a largely successful

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comments. See *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and other contemporary sources*, trans. with intro. and notes by M. Lapidge and S. Keynes (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 133-4. Many thanks to David Pratt for bringing this similarity to my attention.
[62]   See also Smith, 'Saints in Shining Armour', p. 591, although she limits herself to the suggestion that celibate monks might be 'considered fully masculine within their own sphere'.

attempt to reconcile the same men to a more central aspect of their social status – the defence of honour, if necessary through violent action? It seems that manhood could exist without sex; what is less clear is that manhood could exist without strength and honour. The language of manhood and renown shows itself just as capable of being redirected to spiritual life as it was, in very different circumstances, to sexual life. The continuing success, even amongst devout lay audiences, of the strategy of opposing the fight against sin to the manly impulses of worldly honour, or to the bodily desire for sex, suggests that we should take care before regarding the late medieval clergy as doomed to 'emasculinity'.

Contrary to recent critiques of the undesirable consequences of the cultural or linguistic turn, such an order of priorities need not imply the abandonment of a general perspective or of a broader narrative, although it would alter the way that such a long view was composed. The logic of the language of manhood explored in this article shows the power of concepts of honour and shame in the definition of the status of a 'man' in medieval England. It suggests that a view of manhood more commonly associated with Mediterranean societies was well established in England in the later middle ages, and for some time before and afterwards.[63] This should, I think, destabilise further the picture presented by the earliest theoretical frameworks proposed for the history of masculinity, which portrayed a series of gender eras, each with their characteristic qualities, and each replaced in turn by successive crises of masculinity.[64] Historians have already noted the weakness of such an approach in terms of the illusion of uniformity it can give for a particular epoch. They have underlined how men always had a variety of possibilities at their disposal to pursue socially valued roles in their respective social group.[65] But in doing so scholars have perhaps run the risk of emphasizing diversity rather too much, and of overlooking the fact that some masculinities related more closely than others to certain culturally valued forms of behaviour, notably those linked to the status of a 'man'. I would suggest that we still risk underestimating the power of deep-established cultural concepts of manhood, notably a strong substratum of association between

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[63]   For such values in twentieth-century Mediterranean societies, see J. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: The values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago, 1974); David Gilmore (ed.), *Honor and shame and the unity of the mediterranean* (Washington, D.C., 1987); P. Bourdieu, 'Le sens de l'honneur' in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé par Trois études d'ethnologie kabyle* (Paris, 2000), pp. 19-60; A. Blok, *Honour and violence* (Malden, Mass., 2001).

[64]   An approach launched by M. Kimmel, 'The Contemporary "Crisis of Masculinity" in Historical Perspective' in Harry Brod (ed.), *The Making of Masculinities* (Boston, 1987) and followed notably by McNamara, 'Herrenfrage'; Anthony Fletcher, 'Men's dilemma: the future of patriarchy in England, 1560-1660', *TRHS*, 6th ser., 4 (1994), 61-81.

[65]   Karras, *Boys to Men*, pp. 161-2; Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 1-17.

being a 'man' and requiring recognition of a certain status, face-to-face, if necessary by violence. This association was alive and well in fifteenth-century York, seventeenth-century Cambridge or nineteenth-century London, despite the long-established tension with the sober values of the patriarch or priest who fights sin instead of his fellow Christians, or the less respectable priorities of the youth, dedicated to fashion, sex and drink. As well as stressing the multiplicity of socially located masculinities, we need to consider each culturally valued masculinity as one configuration amongst competing sets of values which, if not eternal, changed at a far slower rate than early studies suggested. The present article has served only to scrape the surface of how this enterprise might be undertaken, and to raise some as yet unanswered questions, but if we are to avoid giving a Whig interpretation of masculinity, it is with these questions that we must begin.