Michèle Cohen.


Reviewed by Stephen H. Gregg

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The catalyst for Michèle Cohen's essay is expressed in the preface as a question of 'tracing the emergence of the notion that French is a female language', which leads Cohen to explore 'the fashioning of the gentleman in eighteenth-century England, and role of representations of French manners and language in the formation of an English masculine national identity'. In fact, this very specific focus - she concentrates upon educational and conduct literature - enables a wide historical survey covering part of the nineteenth century too. However, this leads to some drawbacks. With her book coming in at just over a hundred pages, one felt that many relevant issues of masculinity are given little or no space.

Cohen's introduction surveys the value placed upon female company and conversation for the fashioning of gentlemen in the eighteenth century, and outlines the problematics simultaneously raised in the elevation of women to this role. At the beginning of the century politeness and vivacity of conversation, learned through conversation with females, polished male manners, a perception most enthusiastically propounded by *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. The name of Addison and Steele's first periodical is no accident. At once gently ridiculing the sound of female conversation, yet implicitly asking a largely male readership to enter into this social space to improve their manners, it immediately raises the issue that although female conversation was praised, the female 'tongue', as Cohen points out, was derogated as mere babble and gossip. Examining the influence of French models of gentlemanliness, or honnêteté, Cohen explores the differences between the fashioning of the French and English gentleman. She concludes that whilst the English recognised the possibilities that female company could refine male manners, the importation of French models of refinement and manners led to profound anxieties about masculinity. The representation of the Fop as mere display and imitation articulated the anxieties of this seductive influence. French models of refinement had not been used by Englishmen, rather, they were deemed to have invidiously seduced and sapped the virile language and manners of the nation's men. Importantly, Cohen recognises the centrality of effeminacy to articulations of eighteenth-century masculinity, an underestimated axis of analysis to date. Masculinity's most telling 'other' was not femininity, or even male-male desire, but the expression of that peculiarly male anxiety, effeminacy: the fear that too much contact with women, or culture conceived as feminine, renders men emasculated.

Cohen's subsequent chapters upon politeness and the Grand Tour chart these anxieties as they changed over the century. Her brief analysis of the Earl of Chesterfield's letters to his son are apposite for the belief
that foreign travel, French company and the learning of the French language is the way to refined manners and social success. She then goes on to outline a differing model of masculinity delineated in David Fordyce's *Dialogues Concerning Education*, which, along with Richard Hurd's *Dialogues on the Uses of Foreign Travel*, vilifies contact with French culture, and espouses a manly, vigorous education in opposition to French servility and effeminacy. The Grand Tour was deemed to have failed as a mode of education. However, it is here that I would have expected that another model of masculinity might have been brought in. After all, having mentioned the representations of the Fop, it seems a striking omission not to include any mention of that other reviled style of masculinity, the Libertine. Chesterfield's letters were thought to have promoted a libertine attitude to social power, and as a representation, the Libertine figure lived on well until the later eighteenth century. The Grand Tour for the Libertine was an opportunity to fashion a manly knowledge via sexual contact with women (or men), and was a style of masculinity that did not automatically lead to effeminacy. Witness the 'noble lust' of John Wilkes or James Boswell in their accounts of European Travel. Clearly, the Libertine articulated anxieties of male sexuality. However, although he was deemed socially unacceptable by writers such as Steele and Richardson (among others), in other ways he embodied an ideal of manliness in that he represented the opposite of the effeminizing influence of foreign travel and education.

After the chapter on the Grand Tour, her chapter on 'The Accomplishment of the Eighteenth-Century Lady' seems like a sudden change of gear. Although related to her question of the French language, it does not shed any further light on 'Fashioning Masculinity', and one cannot help thinking that other aspects of her essay could have been expanded instead. By contrast, her penultimate chapter, entitled 'The Sexed Mind', brings Cohen to the nexus of her book: just how representations of manliness refracted changes in attitudes to language education. Outlining how gender differences became solidified into an incommensurable and 'natural' sexual difference, Cohen delineates how boy's minds were deemed to exemplify the essential strength and depth of manly intellect, in opposition to the showy and shallow brilliance of the girl's mind. In the Clarendon and Taunton Commissions on education in the 1860s these changes are articulated by a stress upon method, grammar, and Latin for boy's institutions, against the focus upon oral dexterity and the teaching of French in girl's institutions. This leads Cohen to the larger issue of the gendering of academic achievement still noted today.

Her final chapter is merely an overview of the previous chapters, with considerable repetition, and exemplifies the book's weakness. One felt that much had been skimmed over or overlooked. As well as the Libertine, Cohen's analysis could have been broadened by some consideration of 'muscular Christianity', a model of masculinity espoused most prominently by the *Tom Brown* books of Thomas Hughes and set in the educational institutions designed to fashion the men who would preserve England's empire. Also, although her theoretical stance - mostly Foucaultian - works well, the inclusion of the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on homosociality might have brought interesting light to bear upon the relations between men when espousing or fearing contact with women's conversation and company. Male conversation and

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friendship, held as an ideal, also had to be policed. Pamphlets such as Satan’s Harvest Home (1749), horrified at the unmanly education of boys, decried the importation of French (and Italian) manners of greeting. No longer is there the English manly handshake, kissing, the author declared, is the inlet to effeminacy and sodomy. Whilst not disagreeing with Cohen’s focus upon gender, or the necessity of delineating the differences between effeminacy and male-male desire, to omit altogether any consideration of homoeroticism and homosociality weakens her essay.

However, Cohen’s exploration of the changes in masculinity over two centuries constitutes the strength of her book: an appreciation of the historical specificity of masculinity. The corresponding sensitivity that masculinity, far from being a trans-historical given - an ideological construct that supports asymmetrical power relations between men and women - has been articulated in different guises and through different ideals according to the exigencies of nationalism creates a dynamic interaction that points up the construction of English male ideals. The specific focus upon the role of French language and manners in the articulation of English manliness is a useful addition to the increasing work upon eighteenth-century masculinity, such as Carolyn Williams’ Pope, Homer, and Manliness, Michael McKeon’s fine essay ‘Historicizing Patriarchy’, and the recent essays on effeminacy and luxury published in Textual Practice 11:3 (1997).

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