Introduction

New Men: Feminist Histories of
Manliness in Early British America

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What, then, is the American, this new man?
—J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, 1782

In 1782, when J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur published his description of American society and wrestled with what it meant to be an American, he articulated a question that many were asking: “What, then, is the American, this new man?” For every generation that followed, the question has resonated. New Men takes up Crevecoeur’s question and applies it to early America using the insights of gender history. It approaches the history of masculinity as a feminist project in that it signals the gendered subjectivity of men and highlights the social and cultural construction of that subject position, especially with regard to power relations. While scholarship on women in early America has demonstrated the centrality of gender to understandings of womanhood, men, long at the center of historical studies, have only relatively recently been examined as gendered subjects.

New Men examines masculinity in British America from European settlement through the Revolutionary era. It argues that understandings of manliness significantly shaped the founding and development of early America. Historians have shown that in early America successful manhood rested on the establishment of a household, the securing of a calling or career, and the self-control over one’s masculine comportment. Within this broad framework, the essays in this volume examine how the conditions of early America affected those norms and ideals of masculinity and linked them to ever-changing regional and nascent American identities. The essays here collectively address the variety of standards and ideals of manliness in early America and highlight the breadth of differences among them.
It has become increasingly popular for mainstream media to report on the latest scientific finding about “male” and “female” brains. Evolutionary biologists and other scientists garner widespread attention for postulating genetic and biological explanations for generalized social differences observed in male and female behavior. Gender, or the social expression of and meanings given to biological difference between men and women, is recognized as an important aspect of society and history, but not all disciplines agree on the origins of gender difference.

Virtually all historians of gender approach differences between male and female historical subjects as the product not of evolutionary brain chemistry, but rather with the theoretical position that gender is socially constructed. Following the French theorist Michel Foucault, most scholars approach gender as a social and cultural construction. Joan Scott, drawing from Foucault, explained that gender is “knowledge about sexual difference”—understandings that get “produced in complex ways” and that are not limited “only to ideas but to institutions and structures, everyday practices as well as specialized rituals.” The earliest major histories of American masculinity employed this theoretical framework, as do the most recent. Anthony Rotundo, in his study of nineteenth-century Northern manhood, argued that “manliness is a human invention . . . learned, used, reinforced, and reshaped by individuals in the course of life.” Similarly, Michael Kimmel, in his study of modern American manliness, approached gender as “the sets of cultural meanings and prescriptions that each culture attaches to one’s biological sex.” All the essays in New Men follow this theoretical underpinning and focus on how society and culture develop understandings of masculinity that are in turn frequently naturalized—or culturally defined or masqueraded as if from nature, not culture.

Although books on masculinity in colonial America are relatively few and quite recent, a larger selection of articles and book chapters has expanded our understanding of masculinity in the colonial context with a cross-Atlantic perspective. But the essays on manliness in early America are largely scattered and serve the purposes and intellectual pursuits of a range of fields, including histories of slavery, sexuality, Native America, and cross-cultural and cross-border histories of early America, among others. As Toby Ditz cautions, a growing body of literature on masculinity runs the “risk of occluding women and downplaying men’s power over women,” and creates the “danger of restoring men—however particularised, differentiated and socially constructed—to the centre of our historical narrative.”
One of the reasons that the work has been able to recenter men is that much of it has been easily integrated in a variety of fields whose primary concern is not with gender studies. This is in part because of the traditional focus on men and men's experiences. Men, long at the center of historical studies, are still written about as un-gendered subjects, despite decades of scholarship that has established gender as central to societies and has critiqued the age-old use of the “universal” historical subject—as that subject was virtually always male, white, and middle class.

By focusing explicitly on the construction of manliness in early America, this book heeds the call of women's and gender scholars to deepen our understanding of the historical formation and deployment of gendered power in America. Within the broad understanding of masculinity in early America, the essays in this volume examine how gender operated specifically in terms of oppositional identities, social interactions, and the cultural development of norms and ideals.

Several essays highlight how understandings of manliness affected social and cultural developments. The first two chapters (part I) examine manliness in the seventeenth-century era of settlement in Virginia and New England. John Gilbert McCurdy’s examination of early Jamestown rereads the failure of the Virginia Company with an eye toward gendered norms of masculine comportment. Thus he concludes that Anglo-American masculinity was being defined on the ground at the same time that definitions of masculinity were threatening the cohesion of the fledgling colony. Ann Marie Plane’s work on dreams and dream recording in colonial New England traces a fascinating medium for self-reflection and highlights the ways dream interpretation informed and reflected manliness for Anglo-Americans and Algonquians. She also finds that white men formulated their masculine identities in opposition to Native Americans and other perceived threats to white patriarchal order.

Colonial warfare and conflict figures in the second pairing of essays. Susan Abram’s ethnographic study of Cherokee manhood and warfare finds a spiritual aspect of manliness. Tyler Boulware’s chapter builds on the gendered order of Native American societies and examines how discourses of masculinity among British, Americans, and Native Americans during the Seven Years’ War informed that conflict.

As illustrated by the chapters by Boulware, Brown, and Plane, masculine identities were often developed in oppositional relationships across racial, gender, and class divides. Several essays in this book, including those in part
III, focus on Atlantic world constructions of manliness. Natalie Zacek’s study of white masculinity in the Leeward Islands makes the compelling point that even within a racialized society, relations among white men mattered significantly. Trevor Burnard’s chapter finds that in Jamaica white masculinity was defined in opposition to black masculinity as much as in opposition to white womanhood. Carolyn Eastman finds that in the Atlantic world of print representations of pirates, the tropes of deviant gender and sexuality reflected some realities and popularized others.

The pairing of essays in part IV illustrates the various ways that manliness could be performed or enacted depending on social and cultural circumstances. In contrast to the social development that was stymied by gendered notions of manhood in McCurdy’s Jamestown, Jessica Roney finds that understandings of white masculinity in eighteenth-century Philadelphia fueled charitable and philanthropic (white) men’s societies in a host of venues. Kathleen M. Brown’s essay on black masculinity traces a broad narrative from the earliest days of colonial settlement to the early republic, arguing that the body served to perform and illustrate masculinity for black men—who, in contrast to Roney’s subjects, generally had neither property nor independence.

The final chapters underscore the varieties of ways that manly identities were forged in the context of the American Revolution. Janet Lindman’s study of masculinity and ministry during the American Revolution examines how models of manliness emphasized self-control, and often did so in a Christian framework. Cultural messages both reinforced and developed new notions of manliness at the same time that they also gave voice to radical and deviant models of manliness. Benjamin H. Irvin similarly locates constructions of manliness at work in the political (and personal) rhetoric of the Revolutionary era. Irvin examines the figure of the henpecked husband as a measure of manly standards wielded by both loyalists and patriots as they attacked the authority of Congress to enter in a war of colonial independence. As this trope of manhood motivated factions in the American Revolution, Irvin suggests the figure of the henpecked husband might well be thought of as a “forgotten foot soldier” in the war.

Political figures and structures also play a role in this study of early American manhood. In my own essay, John Adams’s emphasis on the classical story of the Choice of Hercules as a lesson in the importance of masculine virtue and sexual self-restraint highlights but one aspect of masculinity in the broader political world of the Revolutionary era.
Through these essays, *New Men*, with its focus on colonial and Revolutionary America, shows that long before industrial and capitalist models of masculinity became central to U.S. culture, manliness was defined in a variety of important ways—and conversely, that notions of manhood affected the development of what would become the United States.

**Notes**


4. Histories of masculinity draw on these theories and approaches of gender history, yet as a subfield of women’s and gender history, they have also developed their own approaches for best understanding how manhood was historically informed. As Robert Connell reminds us, we must study *masculinities*—there is no singular model for all men. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996). Scholars have also argued that masculinity should be studied as it formulates itself in opposition to womanhood. Historians have called for the need to maintain one eye on “relations of power” while examining “the complex distribution of authority both between and within the sexes and the ways in which this was mediated by gender.” See Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–4.


8. It has become commonplace to view *gender* as distinct from *sex*—a conceptual separation that helped enormously to drive home the point that the cultural and social meanings we attach to the biological difference of male and female should be critically engaged, both historically and in contemporary society. But studies today are increasingly informed by the notion that even our understanding of biology is culturally constructed and that therefore the distinction so carefully drawn between sex and gender in the 1980s and 1990s is flawed. As Judith Butler has argued, it makes “no sense . . . to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category.” Gender, she argues, “must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.” This insight has largely tempered the once strictly guarded division of the terms *sex* and *gender*. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 7.

Judith Butler’s insights into gender construction have also informed a recent wave of literature on the history of gender and gender identity. Butler argued that gender was “performativ[e].” Gender, she argued, is “a doing,” and “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” Building on Butler’s insight, Gail Bederman in her study of ideal nineteenth-century manhood argues that masculinity is a “continual, dynamic process” in which “individuals are positioned or position themselves;” and through which “men claim certain kinds of authority.” Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25; and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 7.