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Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello, eds., *A History of Virility*. Translated by Keith Cohen: New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xiv + 744pp. Notes, plates, index. \$50.00 U.S (cl). ISBN 978-0-231-16878-6.

Review by Robert A. Nye, Oregon State University.

This volume is an abridgement of a longer three-volume French work by the same editors published by *Éditions du Seuil* in 2011. The translator also performed the abridgement, apparently in consultation with the editors. Some of the original chapters are preserved more or less intact, others shortened, and others left out altogether. Of the original forty-six chapters, the work of twenty-six authors is collected here. In his brief prefatory note, the translator writes that his aim was to preserve the narrative structure and the blend of historical overview and particularity that characterizes individual chapters. In what follows, I will not comment on the wisdom of the selection process or on the original French edition, but will review the material at hand.

The sheer size of a volume that begins with the ancient Greeks and concludes with yesterday calls for some analytical triage. I will try to provide a sense of the main themes that provide a kind of conceptual unity to the gender history of the last two millennia. I will discuss some of the chapters in greater detail when they illustrate these larger themes especially well.

But first, we must tackle the editors' decision to organize their history as a history of virility, rather than masculinity, the term more current in English language scholarship. There are only a few traces in this volume of the reasoning behind this choice. One is the argument from historical provenance made by J.-J. Courtine that "virility" was the term everyone used before "masculinity" evolved during the twentieth century from a grammatical category to a category of gender analysis practiced initially in Anglo-American theory and historiography (p. 400). Claude Thomasset makes the distinction that virility is "this appearance that exceeds masculinity" (p. 82), suggesting that virility is composed of masculine qualities, but is somehow greater or more intense. Alain Corbin combines both these points, writing that virility and masculinity are not "synonymous" since "many individuals show a lack of virility and yet give no reason to question their 'masculinity,' a term that dictionaries of the time almost forgot and that cannot be found in the common language" (p. 217). This characterization begs the question of how contemporaries might have thought about the difference between "masculinity" and "virility" if they had no word for or sense of what masculinity was.

Ineluctably, everyone who does gender history nowadays uses the terminology of gender analysis in ways that violate a strict historical reconstruction of what people in the past thought about themselves and their experiences. Though "virility" is used far more frequently in the text, "masculinity" is employed regularly, often in ways that do not allow for clear distinctions. French scholars came relatively late to gender scholarship, but feminist and gender studies have had a decisive influence on the ways they now fit their understanding of the past into gendered frameworks.

The best example of this phenomenon goes largely unexamined in this volume. The word used for male and female in the West until the 1970s has been “sex,” which, from Greek times, and especially since the late Enlightenment, has meant a more or less indivisible union of the sexed body, the social roles appropriate to each sex, and their “normal” sexual orientations. Nonetheless, “gender” is used dozens of times by most of these authors as a synonym for “sex,” or even as a replacement for it, which surely does as much violence to “common language” and meaning as “masculinity.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Notwithstanding their preference for “virility,” the editors embrace gender studies and do not endorse the vocal criticism in current French cultural and political debates on the use of “gender theory” in education and scholarship.<sup>[2]</sup> The traits of virility, they write in their brief preface, are by no means “fixed,” but “are reconstructed over time” (p. xiii).

Among these traits are the physical and sexual changes of the maturing (and aging) male, which are continuously reinterpreted, but also moral qualities, which the editors describe as “an ideal of power and virtue, self-assurance and maturity, certitude and domination” (p. xiii). There is thus a biological foundation for virility that presents itself and is understood by contemporaries as a natural phenomenon, and a set of inculcated qualities young men acquire in ways that vary by era, class, region, or trade.

A great strength of this volume is that most of its authors characterize the paths men must take to achieve this virile domination as littered with obstacles, and virility itself as, finally, impossible to fully attain. J.-J. Courtine quotes Pierre Bourdieu on this point: “Male privilege is also a trap [...] that obliges every man to affirm his virility in every circumstance [...]. Everything works together to make of the ideal of impossible virility the principle of an immense vulnerability” (p. 402). Bourdieu himself principally uses “masculine” in his analysis of male gender in *La Domination masculine* (1997), but his use of “virility” in this instance permits Courtine to underscore the agonistic dimension of virile ideals favored in this volume.<sup>[3]</sup>

The first chapters on Greek and Roman virility and on the fall of Rome to “virile” barbarians dwell on the sexual signs of physical maturation, body hair, physique, and other indicators of a boy’s passage to reproductive manhood. Though the Greeks and Romans were no less committed to socializing young boys in their duties as fathers, citizens, and warriors than later civilizations, these are the only chapters that devote much space to physical development, a strange thing in light of the preoccupation throughout the history of Western medicine with sex difference, developmental processes, and the somatic basis of sexual norms. Greek and Roman boys could be love objects until they sprouted hair on their chins, at which point their virility was expressed in body hair and beard, a hard, tanned body, and athleticism. Warrior virility was the quality ancient civilizations prized above all else. When the empire fell, the Romans of the decadence were prone to contrast their declining aptitude for war with the virile barbarian hordes that overran them.

Strength, manly ostentation, and violent domination persisted as ideals within the knightly classes throughout the European Middle Ages, but by the sixteenth century an upper-class man’s virile attributes inclined toward self-restraint, and the courtesy that enabled him to navigate town and court. The violence of the jousting tournament yielded to the more exacting skill of wielding a rapier in duels of honor, themselves the product of a more refined courtly sensibility. In the portraits of the period, princes puffed out their chests, and tucked a fist into one hip, or posed with dogs or horses, seeking to project a controlled strength that radiated assurance in settings of power.

Early modern *belles lettres* explored less confident terrain. Lawrence Kritzman and Michel Delon find ample evidence in texts from Rabelais to Sade of the risks of virile pretension: fears of impotence, cuckoldry, and ambiguous forms of gender that threatened to undermine male identity and their mastery of women. Arlette Farge finds the same fears in common folk where men’s legal and traditional

dominance in marriage presumed a control of his wife and her sexuality that was not always achieved. The myths of gender are always in reciprocal relation. The phantasm of male impotence and women's sexual insatiability has been endlessly reconfigured over time.

More variegated masculinities had emerged by the end of the eighteenth century and more attention was paid to the cultivation of virile traits that seemed less dependable than in days of yore. Gender segregation, which had always prevailed in Western societies, undertook the shaping of boys (and girls) in more systematic ways. In the schools, in sport, and in family life, boys were taught a bodily hexis of self-control and the ideals of courage, loyalty and honor. Under Bonaparte, the aristocratic notion of honor became virilized and nationalized, and in civilian life an ambitious young man became familiar with weapons in the distinct possibility he would have to defend his masculine reputation in the dueling culture that flourished throughout the nineteenth century in continental Europe. Beards and moustaches reappeared as signs of virility in an otherwise feminized culture of consumption, a recurrent phenomenon in the West.

In the modern era, sexuality was more openly discussed, and male sexual exploits became as much a sign of virility as fathering children. In a particularly interesting chapter, Alain Corbin follows the mid-nineteenth-century correspondence of Stendhal, Flaubert, Mérimée and other male writers as they discussed their sexual conquests, the number and quality of their orgasms, and shared information about their favorite prostitutes, whom they occasionally shared. According to Corbin, it was acceptable to admit to the occasional "fiasco," and certainly *de rigueur* to brag about pleasures given, but the emphasis was generally on one's own "need to fuck," which became in this era "an essential constituent of virility" (p. 277). But this imperious need was tempered by the specter of sexual exhaustion, which medical experts argued loomed on the horizon. Every sexual encounter was an opportunity for an expression of masculine energy, but was also a test of the self-control that was necessary to protect a man's health and potency. These concerns profoundly validated the supposed dangers sexually voracious women posed to a man's sexual and moral economy.

On the spectrum of pathology and norm that prevailed in the nineteenth century, devirilization was equivalent to effeminization, in which an otherwise normal man, deprived of the superior energy required for heterosexual coitus, could be aroused only by fetishes or other paraphilia that bordered on perversion. The most scandalous expression of such deflected desires was homosexuality, regarded at the time as an obsession of hopelessly effeminate men. There were some well-known defenders of wholly masculine homosexuals in this era, but their words went unnoticed.

There are some fine chapters on military virility and the impact on Western masculinities of contact with foreign peoples and colonized populations. In general, native peoples provided the opportunity to project the fears and prejudices of Western explorers and colonizers on populations that were characterized as either hypersexual and formidably virile or degraded and effeminate, according to circumstance. Colonization also afforded the opportunity to display and practice martial masculinity. As Paul-Leroy-Beaulieu warned his contemporaries in 1874, it was "the empire or death" (p. 326). The teaching of military skills in schools after 1870, and the adoption of conscription meant most young men would undergo the experience of segregation and inculcation with military values, a development that transformed common soldiers from objects of contempt into embodiments of heroic virtues.

Two crucial twentieth-century developments created a crisis in society's understandings of the masculine orthodoxies of the past. The Great War sent men brimming with a sense of warrior masculinity into battle, but returned a generation of men who were physically and mentally mutilated, and whose vulnerability as men was painfully evident to themselves and their fellow citizens. This same generation was also experiencing a change in the traditional workplace in which new manufacturing techniques geared to efficiency and streamlining reduced workers with a broad range of skills into

repetitive automata, or moved them into jobs that did not require physical skills at all, disrupting virile rites of passage and work challenges that had been part of working-class culture for a century.

These developments produced two distinct reactions that have marked the history of virility in our times. Several authors devote space to the first of these: the reaction against a diminution of virile manhood through an embrace of hyper-masculine forms of militarized violence, male bonding, and renewed forms of sex segregation. Fascism in its many European variants was the most dramatic reaction of this kind, but youth movements, violent gangs, and a newly assertive misogyny were closely related phenomena. Steely and violent resolve, toughness, and risk-taking behavior were the most admired traits.

The other reaction was a grudging acknowledgment that unalloyed masculine power could no longer play the role in the world it once had, and that men had to make some accommodation with women, with other men, and with the feminine in themselves. This process has been marked by rear-guard resistance, as Claudine Haroche notes, consisting of patronizing behavior and conventions of politeness that distance or diminish women. Fabrice Virgili has studied patterns of domestic violence in the twentieth century and found a glacial progress in the punishment of violent or homicidal husbands and of rape in France. Christine Bard notes the steady male obstruction to changes in paternal power, divorce rights, and child custody arrangements, the virulent denunciation of feminism and feminists, and new forms of pornography that objectify and humiliate women. A last chapter by J.-J. Courtine exposes the compensatory masculine obsession with body building as “one of the most spectacular manifestations of a culture that is virile in appearance” (p. 591).

Virile power is thus not undone, but it has been deprived of its historical endpoint of dominance. Changes in family structures have made way for new forms of fatherhood and paternity, old rites of passage have disappeared, military masculinity is on the wane with the end of universal military service, the despised category of effeminacy has been challenged by homosexual men, and various forms of virility have been appropriated by women.

Many of the authors in this volume did original research for their chapters, while others are pedestrian surveys. A half dozen authors have done truly comparative work, incorporating material from Great Britain, North America and a few other European countries, but the great majority have relied nearly altogether on French sources and do not bother to compare French virility with virilities elsewhere. This may leave readers with the suspicion that French legal and cultural structures that have historically supported masculine dominance have not been subjected to sufficient critical analysis. Anglo-American gender scholars of French history receive short shrift here.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Maurice Sartre, “Greek Virilities”

Jean-Paul Thullier, “Roman Virilities”

Bruno Dumézil, “Hybridity and Transformation”

Claude Thomasset, “Medieval Strength and Blood”

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Bruno Nassim Abroudar, "Exhibitions: Virility Stripped Bare"

Jean-Jacques Courtine, "Brawn in Civilization: Virile Myth and Muscular Power"

## NOTES

[1] I have discussed how "gender" is systematically replacing "sex" in everyday discourse, and in scientific and technical language in "How Sex Became Gender," *Psychoanalysis and History* 12/2(July, 2010):195-209.

[2] See Alain Corbin's defense of women's history and gender analysis in a debate in the pages of *Le Figaro* with the diehard anti-feminist Eric Zemmour. "Mais où est passée la virilité?" *Le Figaro*, Oct. 15, 2011, <http://sante.lefigaro.fr/actualite/2011/10/15/13853-mais-est-passee-virilite>.

[3] For an overview of Bourdieu's contributions to gender, power, and historical analysis see Philip S. Gorski, ed., *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

Robert A. Nye  
Oregon State University  
[nyer@onid.orst.edu](mailto:nyer@onid.orst.edu)

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