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Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. 246 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. £31.50 U.K.; \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8122-3699-8; £12.50 U.K.; \$17.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8122-1834-5.

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The subject of this comparatively brief book—the text itself runs to 167 pages—is both ambitious and in many ways still pioneering. There were, for example, two collections of essays on aspects of medieval masculinity published in 1999, but there is very little else before that date or indeed after.[1] It is particularly interesting that some of the scholars who have ventured into the field are in fact women drawing upon a background in feminist history. Ruth Karras's own pedigree is especially interesting since of late years she had made a name for herself writing in the area of women's history and the history of sexuality, her best known work being her monograph study of prostitution in later medieval England. This background is apparent at various points through the present work and notably in the concluding remarks that see patriarchal values and the subordination of women as central to the construction of ideologies of masculinity.

The ambition of the book lies in its attempt to offer an overview of a still largely unexplored problematic over a long period of time—the later Middle Ages understood primarily as the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—and the whole of western Europe, although Scandinavia and the Iberian peninsula are not much represented. This is a culturally diverse region. It is also quite a long chunk of time—brief perhaps in the context of the medieval era as a whole, but long enough to have experienced significant changes in the economic climate, patterns of land holding, and political structure. Karras sidesteps these obstacles early on in her study by asserting that 'both period and region form a coherent enough unit to treat them together'. It follows that two crucially significant dynamics of historical research are effectively effaced.

The title of the book *From Boys to Men* would suggest that its focus is the socialisation of young males and the means by which they acquired particular masculine gender identities. This turns out only partly to be the case. First, childhood is of no concern to the author here since, so she claims, there is already an abundant scholarship on childhood. (There is a literature, but it owes more to an agenda set by Phillipe Ariès in 1960 than to modern gender scholarship.[2]) Second, Karras is more interested in ideas and ideology than in training and the way these ideologies were inculcated. Moreover, in so far as aspects of gender identity might be considered to be performative, that is constantly reinscribed through repeated actions, a greater emphasis on the practice of masculinity would have been welcome.

Because there is no one hegemonic, medieval notion of masculinity, the book sets out to explore three different masculinities. The first part of the book considers aristocratic masculinity, the second the masculinity of university students, and the final part of the book that of the apprentice. This selection is clearly determined by the underlying availability of sources. For aristocratic notions there is an extensive chivalric literature including Chastellain's account of Jacques de Lalaing, the memoirs of Olivier de la Marche, and Geoffroi de Charny's work on chivalry.[3] Thus for chivalric culture and the ideology of masculinity that is intrinsic to that culture, France and French sources understandably provide the main model. For university life the sources are more diverse. There are numbers of collections of university records including statutes and the like, though here Karras is perhaps more dependent on a secondary literature. There are also the texts used as part of the university syllabus. For apprentices there are large numbers of extant guild ordinances and a fair body of legal material relating

to disputes between masters and apprentices.[4] In the case of England, Karras has also used some petitions made in respect of apprentices to the lord chancellor.

The rationale for these three case studies is readily defensible. Much as we would like to ask about peasant masculinity, the sources are simply much more tenuous. On the other hand, the choice of university students, a pretty small minority in the period discussed, rather than the much larger issue of clerical masculinity, of which student masculinity must be but a subset, is puzzling. There has, after all, been some interesting work already done here, notably by Swanson and Cullum in the 1999 collection of essays edited by Dawn Hadley.[5] These two essays are only discussed in the concluding section of this present book. Some other scholarship on medieval masculinity does not even reach the bibliography, perhaps because they fall outside the particular focus of this present work. Nelson's brilliant essay on aristocratic masculinity, for example, is focused on the period c. 900, but its implications transcend its particular chronological frame.[6]

Despite this somewhat restricted focus, underpinning each case study is an impressive body of secondary writings. Karras's bibliography ranges pretty widely and includes monographs and articles in English, French, German, and Dutch. This reading is deployed to provide on any topic a range of references relating to different localities, different moments in time, sometimes even different practices. Although this range of reference is impressive and demonstrates that Karras's scholarship is firmly rooted in her sources, it does not make for easy reading. Sometimes the diversity of illustrations impedes rather than clarifies the point. Sometimes it prompts questions about cultural and chronological variation that are not part of the author's own agenda. It is rather like trying to digest a meal made of many different ingredients and sometimes conflicting flavours.

There are, however, a few moments when the text seems to lack any supportive reference. Thus it is asserted that 'the typical knightly household owned several books that quite often included chivalric literature' (p. 26). The evidence for the ownership of books is hardly extensive, but my own impressionistic observation would make me question the force of the epithet 'typical'. Elsewhere we are told that this was 'a period in which the status of women eroded' or 'journeymen for the most part could not marry' or that 'often the wife managed the retail end of the business' (pp. 9, 142, 145). These observations are too important to left unsupported or unchallenged. In general, however, points made are scrupulously referenced. More occasionally we find statements that are referenced but whose validity can still be challenged. Thus the blanket statement, based on Herlihy, that males universally married late had already been challenged when Herlihy wrote in 1985.[7] Certainly it does scant justice to the evidence for considerable variation between regions, status groups and, probably, over time.

Early in her discussion, Karras asserts that there was no crisis of masculinity in this period. This she ties to her claim that the 'status' of women was deteriorating. Given that crises of masculinity have become such a cliché to the point that it is hard not to conclude that a state of angst was integral to masculine identity, this iconoclastic statement is in some ways refreshing. It is more questionable, however, whether such a dogmatic statement should be made at the beginning of an exploration of later medieval masculinity, especially when it rests on so shaky a premise. Aristocratic masculinity, for example, was rooted in a chivalric culture that effectively legitimised and valorised violence. Karras has plenty of material to illustrate this theme and here the likes of Jacques de Lalaing are very pertinent. Such a culture might flourish in the context, for example, of the Hundred Years War, but even that may be questioned in the face of the growing importance of both plebeian archers and, latterly, artillery to the actual campaigning. Its *raison d'être* was, however, challenged in the context, on the one hand, of the search for peaceful governance and on the other of the elevation of administrators and bureaucrats to aristocratic rank precisely in order to achieve these ends. The question thus arises of the degree to which the apparent late medieval flowering of chivalric culture was a conscious attempt to assert an identity that was in fact increasingly redundant and irrelevant or was instead the consequence of a new order of *nobles de robe* attempting to adopt the veneer of warrior identity for which they were in fact ill

equipped. This tension between older and newer forms of identity, so brilliantly essayed by Jinty Nelson for a much earlier era, seems precisely the place to look for some sort of crisis of masculinity.

A common theme that runs through Karras's analysis of masculinity (or more precisely masculinities) is the way in which men formed homosocial groupings in antithesis to females, who tended to be marginalised (as love objects in aristocratic society or as whores and prostitutes in the other two cases of students and apprentices). It may well be that Karras is here influenced by her previous work on medieval prostitution. Working with such material it would be hard not to form a rather jaundiced view of the male identity, but again this perspective is open to challenge. The intellectual current of misogyny that is to be found readily enough in academia did not necessarily spill over into the urban workshop nor does it necessarily explain the sometimes riotous behaviour of students. The type of hypermasculinity displayed by carousing and brawling students—how unlike the modern stereotype so beloved by certain sections of the popular press!—is strikingly akin to that described by Cullum in respect of some of the clerical proletariat. Cullum's thesis, that the clerical estate, with its insistence on celibacy and sobriety, was essentially emasculating and that womanising, heavy drinking, and fighting were ways of proving one's manhood, seems pertinent here also. In the context of the craft workshop, but also the aristocratic estate, the partnership of master and mistress, or of lord and lady, was crucial to the effective management of the business or the family lands. There may have been a clear power relationship between husband and wife, as between master and employee or lord and peasant, but it does not follow that this was underpinned by misogyny any more than the other relationships were characterised by class hatred. Patriarchy is a more complex and subtle institution to be so simply characterised.

I want to conclude by reasserting a point already outlined. Modern Western Europe is still culturally diverse. This diversity would have been rather more apparent in the later medieval past. The model of male authority that numbers of scholars have described for Florentine society, for example, is not replicated in London or York. The sorts of civic brothels designed to provide an 'outlet' and recreation for males in say Narbonne or even Dijon are not found in Paris or Ghent. These are not accidents or the chance result of document survival or loss. They are indicative of profoundly differing underlying social structures reflected in very different patterns of householding, different marriage regimes, and, I would suggest, different gender ideologies. It follows that the masculinities that that might have prevailed in parts of southern Europe would have been significantly different from those of north-western Europe just as we can and should distinguish between an aristocratic masculinity and a bourgeois masculinity (or indeed a peasant masculinity).

I can hardly disguise that there is much about this monograph I find problematic and even irritating. On the one hand, my frustration is dictated by a sense that this important new area of scholarship is being shown no favours by a book clearly intended to reach an undergraduate as well as a more scholarly readership. On the other hand, it is consequent on fairly fundamental differences in our initial premises and our methodological approaches. That does not make this carefully researched and scholarly book a bad book. Nor does it make it, as Jo Ann McNamara is quoted on the back cover, 'a founding document in the field of men's history'. Rather it makes it a provocative book and one that others may be challenged to argue against or defend.

NOTES

[1] Dawn M. Hadley, ed., *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 1999); Jacqueline Murray, ed., *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York and London: Garland, 1999).

[2] Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Plon, 1960). Subsequently translated into English as *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

[3] Kervyn de Lettenhove, ed., *Oeures de Georges Chastellain* (Brussels, 1866); Henri Beaune and J. d'Arbaumont, eds., *Mémoires d'Olivier de la Marche* (Paris, 1883); Richard W. Kaeuper, ed., *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny* (Philadelphia, 1996).

[4] E.g. for London see A. H. Thomas etc., ed., *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls ... of the City of London*. 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1926-61); H. T. Riley, ed., *Memorials of London and London Life* (London, 1868); R. R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books ... of the City of London*. 11 vols. (London, 1899-1912).

[5] P. H. Cullum, 'Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England' and R. N. Swanson, 'Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to reformation', in Hadley, ed., *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*.

[6] J. L. Nelson, 'Monks, secular Men and masculinity, c. 900', in Hadley, ed., *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*.

[7] Richard M. Smith, 'Some Reflections on the Origins of the European Marriage Pattern in England', in C. C. Harris, ed., *Sociology of the Family* (Keele: University of Keele, 1979); Zvi Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1980); Richard M. Smith, 'Hypothèses sur la Nuptialité en Angleterre aux XIIIe-XIVe siècles', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 38 (1983): 107-136.

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