



# MASCULINITY IN THE RENAISSANCE

## 2018

**CONTEXT: MASCULINITY**

notes taken from *THE ARDEN GUIDE TO RENAISSANCE DRAMA*; BRINDA CHARRY and other sources

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## IDEAL MANHOOD

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Ideal manhood was nearly as rigidly defined as ideal femininity

- It was often challenging for men to obtain and retain.

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## MEN'S RESPONSIBILITIES

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Men had a range of responsibilities as heads of household

- they'd have to be...
  - good providers
  - adept
  - brave
  - as well as spiritual leaders of the family flock

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## THOMAS ELYOT'S IDEAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A MAN

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Thomas Elyot (c. 1490 - 1546), an English diplomat and scholar wrote that 'a man in his natural perfection is...

- fierce,
- hardy,
- strong in opinion
- and covetous of glory,
- desirous of knowledge'.

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## GENTRY MASCULINITY

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Gentry masculinity was linked to...

- lineage,
- honour
- and responsibility for and control of a servant and subordinates.

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## IDEAL ARISTOCRATIC MASCULINITY: THE COURTIER

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The ideal model of aristocratic masculinity was the courtier.





- The Italian author Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528) has been translated into English and outlined the skills every quarter or to possess:
  - he had to be a soldier
  - and a horseman
  - and also had to cultivate the 'gentler skills',
    - including the ability to make a good conversation,
    - play and appreciate music,
    - write poetry
    - and dress well.
- Every young man must strive hard to master the skills and must also carry them with a certain unselfconscious ease.

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## FEARS GENERATED BY IDEAL MASCULINITY

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However, even as this new model of masculinity was becoming popular among the nobility, there was the accompanying fear that these men who emphasise fashion and artistic skills would become...

- vain,
- self-indulgent
- and effeminate.
  - Indeed, the *Homily Against Excess of Apparel* expressed the concern that many young men were becoming effeminate because...
    - 'they care not what they spend in disguising themselves ever desiring new toys inventing new fashions'.

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## THE DANGERS OF LOVE

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Love, it was felt, could also effeminize a man.

- In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) Richard Burton states that love is...
  - 'full of fear, anxiety, doubt, peevishness, it turns man into a woman'.
    - Romeo, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1591–95), too worries that Juliet's 'Beauty has made me effeminate / and in my temper softn'd valour's steel' (3.1.115–16).
      - Romeo has little chance when even warriors like Anthony in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1607) and Tamburlaine are softened by love.
        - The latter recognises that his adoration of Zenocrate is 'unseemly... for my sex' and makes him 'effeminate and faint' (part one, 5.2.111, 114).

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## THE FEAR OF CUCKOLDRY

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There were other fears attendant on manhood.



- The man accused of being a cuckold (while not harshly punished like the adulteress was) was subject to humiliation.
  - That is why the very word provokes the protagonist of Othello.
    - The cuckold is treated with humour in comedies, but there is an undercurrent of anxiety in these plays too.
      - Indeed, anxiety and insecurity possibly characterised manhood in the time period.
        - Mark Breitenberg argues that in a society of that conferred power and status on men it was inevitable that they lived in fear of losing this very same power and status.
          - Masculine anxiety reveals the fears as well as the fissures and contradictions underlying masculine identity.
            - However, it was that same anxiety that led to the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchy because men was so disturbed at the prospect of losing the status that they were extra vigilant about defending it.

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## MALE RIVALRY AND STRUGGLES

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The plays often picked different kinds of manhood against each other.

- In the city comedies, *The Roaring Girl* and Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), the preying young 'gallants' were smart young city gentlemen who are pitted against the solid middle-class citizens;
  - in *Romeo and Juliet* the lovelorn Romeo is contrasted to the other men of Verona who are aggressive and belligerent.
    - In many of the tragedies of the period, the men struggle to live up to the standards of masculinity or carried them to the extreme and so destroy themselves and others,
      - as in the case of *Tamburlaine* or *Macbeth*.
        - Most plays had a man at the centre of the action and manhood was often portrayed as a complicated affair –
          - insecure,
          - fragile,
          - extreme,
          - but also admirable.
            - The complexities of masculinity informed the characterisation of the Renaissance tragic hero.

## Bibliography

Th Charry, B. (2017). *The Arden guide to Renaissance drama*. Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury.