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A MAN'S WORLD: REVISITING HISTORIES OF MEN AND GENDER

Bruce Dorsey

Brian P. Luskey. *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. ix + 277 pp. Notes and index. \$48.00 (cloth); \$25.00 (paper).

Richard Stott. *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 376 pp. Notes and index. \$55.00.

Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, a group of historians gave defining shape to a literature on the history of masculinity in America. Building upon pathbreaking articles and essay collections in the previous decade, these scholars trumpeted a new direction for gender history. In quick succession, the definitive surveys and foundational monographs of a new history of men and masculinity appeared.¹ Not only had the formative texts surfaced during this prolific moment of new scholarship, but historians of gender stepped forward to assess critically the highlights and lowlights of what promised to be either an emerging subdiscipline of gender history or merely a fad of “men’s history.”²

As early as 1997, in a book review that should still be required reading for anyone wishing to write about the history of manhood, Gail Bederman wrote: “Two types of ‘men’s history’ are being written these days. One builds on twenty years of women’s history scholarship, analyzing masculinity as part of larger gender and cultural processes. The other . . . looks to the past to see how men in early generations understood (and misunderstood) themselves as men. Books of the second type mostly ignore women’s history findings and methodology.”³ Not every study of the lives and self-reflections of men has relied on the advances that feminist theorists and historians of women have brought to the analysis of gender. Bederman, along with Judith Allen and others, also observed that, too often, the new histories of men parroted the language of their historical subjects, positing American manhood in a perpetual state of “crisis,” a paradigm missing from histories of women in America.⁴

In 2004, nearing the end of this wave of pioneering scholarship, Toby Ditz questioned whether histories of manhood had progressed any further toward a truly gendered history. Ditz rightly observed that the first cohort of men’s

history tended to focus on the sex-segregated spaces—fraternal orders, sporting venues, workplaces, and labor unions—where men developed conceptions of themselves in relation to other men but not necessarily in relation to women. In other words, women were not only excluded from these narratives, but these approaches, Ditz argued, encouraged histories of men “to downplay the deployment of gendered power over women by the men they studied.” By continuing to rely on the crisis paradigm, scholars produced narratives in which men defined themselves against other men and continually found themselves “anxious,” fragile, “imperiled,” and self-divided. Ditz issued a call instead for histories of masculinity that did not omit women but rather foregrounded the exercise of gendered power by men over women. Studies that investigate men’s access to women’s sexuality, reproduction, and labor offer the most promising directions for an integrative gender history.⁵

Practitioners of feminist history have long wished—even optimistically predicted—that specialized studies of men alone, even if these studies proposed to examine men as gendered beings, would one day be replaced by fully integrative histories of gender. Despite these hopes and critiques, it seems that histories solely about men and groups of men show no signs of retreating into a bygone pioneer era of men’s history. Brian P. Luskey’s *Men on the Make* and Richard Stott’s *Jolly Fellows* are two well-researched and elegantly written histories of men in primarily sex-segregated spaces in the nineteenth century. Although neither advances the history of masculinity in the directions advocated by Ditz, Luskey’s analysis is more in line with efforts to develop an integrative gender history.

On the Make tells the story of a group of young white men, commercial clerks, who captivated the interests of Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. The book is not so much a history of all clerks (men in law offices, banks, or insurance companies do not fit this narrative) as it is the story of clerks in large-scale wholesale and retail businesses. Luskey’s “strivers” were not the greatest risk takers in the new economy. They maintained a rather conservative, risk-averse approach to advancement in the antebellum era, less willing to strike out on their own than small-scale entrepreneurs (such as peddlers or barkeepers) or upstart lawyers, doctors, and preachers who pushed their way through the cracks in the exclusionary requirements of the professions. Luskey’s clerks placed their faith instead in a powerful ideological promise: that apprenticing themselves to merchants, patiently working at any assigned task, and devoting themselves to self-improvement (“character” building) would, in the end, elevate them to the status of self-made, independent business owners.

Luskey’s history of clerks overturns many of the assumptions that antebellum historians have made about the trajectory of young men and manhood in the Northern urban economy, revealing how the mythology of “men on the make” failed to deliver on its promises. Luskey interrogates clerks’ diaries

together with advice manuals, and examines newspaper ads by young men seeking work in tandem with credit agency reports, trade cards, and comic valentines, all of which illustrate both the real and imagined clerk for businessmen and readers alike. From these competing sources, he concludes that commercial clerks performed a series of balancing acts over the course of the century. Young male "strivers" straddled the mythical promise of upward social mobility achieved through manly character-development and the harsh reality that, amidst the wreckage of a centuries-old apprenticeship system, their advancement to independent proprietorship was "a process fraught with uncertainty" (p. 18). Many clerks pushed back against advice telling them to "play the man" when faced with "the unavoidable annoyances of a subaltern place" (p. 42) and instead negotiated their own balance between self-denying character development and ambitious striving for advancement and independence.

Opening our eyes anew to the world of clerks, Luskey reveals that other balancing acts performed by these men derived from the nature of their labor. Clerks found themselves caught in a dilemma: in the public's eye they did no manly work, merely the "headwork" of bookkeeping and retail sales; but in reality they were often asked to perform the menial labor of heavy lifting and moving of goods that every mercantile firm required. This physical labor was supposed to be the task of porters, usually African Americans or immigrants. Clerks could not claim for themselves the masculine prowess associated with such labor without jeopardizing the racial and class privileges they wished to maintain as heirs to independent proprietorship and respectable manhood. Every day they were reminded that their position was not much different from other urban laborers, finding themselves just as vulnerable to the cyclical experience of unemployment that accompanied a boom-and-bust economy. Clerks, then, "placed a great deal of emphasis on their white collars," Luskey writes, "because otherwise they found it difficult to differentiate themselves from those who rolled up their sleeves" (p. 65). All of their efforts to reinforce the whiteness of their collars, including their enthusiastic embrace of racist humor and blackface entertainment, reflected a need to conceal the day-to-day soiling of their collars by menial labor.

Clerks found themselves straddling another set of dilemmas when, in the 1840s and 1850s, they tried to engage in political action to demand early closing hours. Self-making men on the road to independence and proprietorship, they believed, should not be "slaving" away at an accounting table or a sales counter. They needed evening hours for debating clubs and subscription libraries to elevate their character. But clerks placed their hopes in a supposed harmony of interests between employers and themselves, thereby overlooking their common ground with urban laborers and eschewing forms of workers' direct actions that might have given them some control over the workplace.

With each passing decade, employers considered clerks nothing more than hired hands, not too dissimilar from female textile workers, and confirmed clerks' diminished status by hiring women to drive down wages. Once clerks eventually made their peace with the fact that merchant-owners considered them mere workers with no realistic opportunities to become independent business owners, they settled into positions similar to the permanent salaried white-collar workforce—the “forerunners of the ‘company men’” (p. 210)—who labored for corporations by the late nineteenth century.

Luskey's most important contribution to the history of gender and sexuality comes in his provocative analysis of how retail clerks at mid-century acquired the pejorative label of “counter jumpers.” The term evoked anxieties about young men as both social climbers and sexual predators who hurdled counters to sell goods to women. The commercial clerk as counter jumper became the foil for widespread anxieties about the increasing irrelevance of a masculine producer-ethic in the U.S. and about the ascendancy of a consumer society, personified by female shoppers in department and clothing stores. What made the counter jumper such a malleable representation in text and images was the fact that the male retail clerk was at once the effete dandy, even more knowledgeable about fashion than his desiring female customers, and a dangerous seducer who appealed to emotions and passions to secure a woman's pleasurable purchases. Nothing better illustrated the need for female clerks in retail stores than the counter jumper, but this image also ensured that the clerk's labors failed to garner him respectable standing as a masculine producer. *Men on the Make* offers a refreshingly integrative gendered history of consumer society precisely because it examines the contestation of masculinity in its relationship to women. The important transformation in masculine identity for the middle class in the new corporate consumer society can best be understood in the power relationships between men and women, not merely in a sex-segregated world of men alone.

Richard Stott's *Jolly Fellows* is a social and cultural history of the disorderly behavior that men performed in largely sex-segregated spaces in the nineteenth century. The existence of these forms of bad behavior by men, which Stott calls “jolly fellowship”—drinking, fighting, gambling, playing pranks, and physical cruelty to animals—is not a new discovery. But Stott frames this behavior with a unique argument: these types of disorder and bonding among men were largely tolerated at the beginning of the nineteenth century across all regions, in both rural and urban settings. The triumph of market capitalism, the hegemonic rise of middle-class values, and the success of a religious awakening, however, led to the replacement of disorderly conduct with a now dominant manhood marked by self-restraint. “Jolly fellowship” then became isolated in specific enclaves—the Bowery in New York City,

Gold Rush mining camps of California, cow-towns of the Wild West, and popular fiction and entertainment—where men remained demographically predominant and where disorderly men could still value shared participation in unrestrained and disreputable masculine conduct. In fact, as violent and disorderly conduct became isolated in these “male milieus,” it now “seemed intensified, even desperate, as if those involved somehow sensed that this might be jolly fellowship’s last fling” (p. 200). These enclaves become, by the book’s end, places where lonely “jolly men” live out a nostalgic embrace of bad behavior, living an old code of conduct in a changing world.

Jolly Fellows is a meticulously researched book that unearths a breadth of primary sources that will impress any reader. One of its most original contributions lies in Stott’s unearthing of the transcontinental connections of sporting men, the “back-and-forth movement of jolly men” (p. 4) between New York and San Francisco in the mid-nineteenth century. Between the Gold Rush and the Civil War, the most famous prizefighters and notorious shoulder-hitters of New York City politics built networks of sporting men and established receptive audiences for similar forms of Democratic politics and popular entertainments on both coasts.

Stott expands the perimeters of the masculine sporting subculture to expose the bonds of intimacy that “jolly men” shared, as well as the “two consciences” they displayed in these male-only spaces (wickedly cruel to outsiders but compassionately charitable toward men in their own group). One of the problems with this analysis is that Stott rarely questions the reliability of his sources; more important, he does not interrogate the cultural narratives embedded within those sources. For instance, he accepts at face value claims that Wild West towns were at once horrifically violent and tenderly benevolent, despite occasional disclaimers that one should not take the sources at their word. This becomes problematic again when Stott tries to prove that African American men “shared the jolly fellows’ love of drinking, gambling, fighting, and pranks” (p. 30). It is misguided to cite slaveholders’ observations of slaves’ behavior, black caricatures in minstrel routines, and trickster characters in black folklore as evidence of slave men’s affinity with white men’s conduct. Stott shows no awareness of the “hidden transcripts” and “public transcripts” that guided slaves’ performances, nor the relationships of power that differentiated these actions from a universal code of “jolly” behavior.⁶ Never does he question whether African Americans really understood this conduct as “jolly.”

Historians of gender will find this book troubling for many of the reasons outlined by Ditz. Like the earliest works in the field, it is more “men’s history” than a history of masculinity or gender. What makes Stott’s jolly behavior “masculine” is that it occurs in spaces defined by a supposed absence of women (or respectable women, to be more precise). Although he acknowledges the possible presence of women, Stott concludes that it is still “the actual physical

presence or absence of women" that was critical to the expression of "jolly fellowship" (p. 7). Stott sees masculinity as behavior exclusive to men, rather than conceptualizing gender as a power relationship that men typically exercised over women. As other historians have shown, even when no women were present in men's drinking settings, men still needed to conjure up symbolic women (often in the form of toasts to the "fair sex") to remind themselves of the relational power of gender hierarchies.⁷ Men's access to women's labor and to women's bodies and sexuality is largely missing from Stott's depiction of this masculine sporting world, despite other historians' demonstration that prostitution was ubiquitous in sporting venues and Wild West locales. Moreover, he repeatedly allows his nineteenth-century sources to conclude for him that this was "just the way men were" (p. 63), or that their conduct was "inevitable and unchangeable; it was men's nature" (p. 40). At other times he toys with the idea that "masculine" conduct might not be a social construction but rather a more universal trait or a matter of biology. Stott never accesses the theoretical work on gender as performance, not recognizing that performing the "masculine" does not necessarily require a male body. This is surprising given his attention to the cultural productions of performative entertainment (minstrelsy, frontier humor, prizefighting, and vaudeville) that provided space for the continuation of "jolly" behavior. Nor is there an acknowledgment that nearly every male-only enclave in the nineteenth century (such as armies, ships, and popular entertainments) witnessed some women passing for men.

For all the meticulous research to uncover the voices of participants and observers of these male activities and spaces, Stott proves less willing to devote similar energies to investigating sexual desire in "male milieus." He notes the ubiquity of male physical intimacy in jolly spaces, observes that prizefighters "became the gold standard in male beauty" and sex symbols "admired more, it seems, by men than by women" (p. 123); yet he retreats from investigating the presence of same-sex desire, resorting to an explanation that his sources speak too little about sex to allow him to draw conclusions. Many historians of sexuality (Clare Lyons, Thomas Foster, Sharon Ullman, and Donna Dennis, among others), however, have managed to expose the spaces of same-sex sexual pleasure and desire with no more forthcoming sources.⁸

The persistence of men's history, particularly histories of male-only groups, might continue to raise the hackles of historians of gender, yet the most promising work still points to the benefits of holistic gender analyses. The originality and breadth of research in Luskey's and Stott's histories of men no doubt will spur on the next cohort of gender historians working on masculinity; those scholars can find in these two provocative books the building blocks for much-needed fully gendered histories of the origins of shopping or the relationship of women and men to sporting culture.

Bruce Dorsey is a professor of history at Swarthmore College and the author of *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (2002) and coeditor of *Crosscurrents in American Culture: A Reader in United States History* (2009). His next book, *Murder in a Mill Town*, investigates the cultural history of the early republic through the lens of an 1833 murder trial.

1. The works that inspired a cohort of young scholars to consider masculinity as an interpretive category were: John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," in Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (1970); Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (1974, 1986); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982); Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (1986); Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (1989); and Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood* (1990). The foundational texts for this field include: E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood* (1993); Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America* (1993); George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (1994); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1995); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (1995); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996); Mark E. Kann, *A Republic of Men* (1998); Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood* (1998); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood* (1998); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women* (2002); and Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood* (2003). I consider Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (2005); Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers* (2005); and Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man* (2006) as marking the maturing of this field of scholarship, although they follow closely on the heels of this first productive decade of scholarship on the history of masculinity.

2. The following review essays and articles offered critiques that helped define the conundrums within the historical literature on masculinity in America: Toby L. Ditz, "What's Love Got to Do with It? The History of Men, The History of Gender in the 1990s," *Reviews in American History* 28 (2000): 167–80; Toby L. Ditz, "The New Men's History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History," *Gender & History* 16 (2004): 1–35; Konstantin Dierks, "Men's History, Gender History, or Cultural History?" *Gender & History* 14 (2002): 147–51; Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *The Canadian Historical Review* 76 (1995): 354–76; Judith A. Allen, "Men Interminably in Crisis? Historians on Masculinity, Sexual Boundaries, and Manhood," *Radical History Review* 82 (2002): 191–207; Bryce Traister, "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies," *American Quarterly* 52 (2000): 274–304; and Bruce Dorsey, "History of Manhood in America, 1750–1920," *Radical History Review* 64 (1996): 19–30.

3. Gail Bederman, review of Kim Townsend's *Manhood at Harvard* (1996), in *Journal of American History* 84 (1997): 680.

4. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 6–11; Allen, "Men Interminably in Crisis?"

5. Ditz, "The New Men's History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power," 1–6, 16–26. Ditz wrote ironically: "It is a wonder they ever got out of bed in the morning, and yet they constructed to their own benefit urban, industrial economies and imposed imperial systems straddling the globe at enormous cost to others" (p. 6).

6. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990).

7. Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 95–97.

8. Clare A. Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 119–54; Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man*; Sharon R. Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (1997); Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (2009).