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The Masculine Self In Late Medieval England.

By Derek G. Neal. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. 320.

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Historian Derek Neal divides masculinity into two main areas, the public and the private self, basing his division on George Devereux's social and psychological aspects of gender identity. Unlike many other books on masculinity in the Middle Ages, Neal does not focus on the aristocratic or knightly class, choosing his documentary evidence from secular court documents and letters, stating that not only do the less-glamorous classes deserve study, but that 'middle class' masculinity itself is distinctive. He argues convincingly that using court cases as evidence, even if not mainstream, show masculinity under tension. Cases for libel, for example, in his studies concentrate on accusations of dishonesty. When a man accuses another of being a thief, Neal argues, the accusations strikes less at the deed done—a specific act of theft—and more at the core of masculine identity in a society where a man's honesty and true-dealing were essential to his identity. The masculinity under investigation here is homosocial and hierarchical, but their understanding, as Neal sees it, is that every male is in some level

of service to someone higher—even kings serve God. Social identity means more than simply one's place in the chain.

Also vital to masculine identity is the notion of 'husbandry', that is, the proper care and management of resources. These resources could be financial—such as wasting money on other women—or against the value of a woman herself: Neal states one court case where a man was harshly judged for having beaten his wife into a coma. The beating was deemed wrong not out of any modern-day notion of domestic violence, but because the man caused permanent and irreparable damage to a high-value item—his wife. This notion of husbandry not only separates Neal's notion of masculinity from sexuality, but it creates a masculinity in which all males, even those who have taken vows of celibacy. Religious celibates, Neal argues, only rarely existed entirely free from the masculine social world. To properly participate in the lives of their flock, priests must have also participated in homosocial relationships.

The third chapter takes up the topic of the body in relation to masculinity. First, he tackles the idea of the body as a canvas for display. Men, he states, sought to dress well, even in spite of spiritual prohibitions against pride and vainglory, as a form of display, not to impress women, but rather to impress upon other men their own status. Fine clothing advertised one's wealth—a positive indicator of prosperity—but also, the new notion of dressing 'in fashion' added a layer to this middle class masculinity that

rated worldliness highly. A fashionable dresser advertised his knowledge of other places and other customs.

Excesses of fashion, and excesses of the body in general, were necessary to the type of male subjectivity Neal is sketching. Without an appetite that might overindulge, there is nothing to control. Neal's masculinity requires a suppressive power principle, similar to that proposed by Foucault, to exert control and discipline. A man without self-control was not a man, in Neal's model, and a man with self-control needed something to control. The varying degrees of control over the appetite created a variety of possible masculine subjectivities. This also created a possible venue for failure, such as the case of Nicholas from Lincolnshire, whose inability to sexually perform ended up in courts and involved an impressive array of kidnapping and threats, presumably to enact masculinity through other means.

Chapter four steps away from the history and into romance. Using Derek Brewer's *Symbolic Stories*, Neal posits that the basic plot of romances is establishment of the self with a social identity, dramatizing a psychic conflict similar to what Freud posited for male maturation. The young man must disidentify with the mother. He then must establish a new identification with the father, here, forging homosocial bonds that go beyond the simple Freudian conception of the father as ultimate and punitive authority.

Romances also foreground male desire. Neal studies a number of romances including *Percival*, *Lybaeus Desconus*, *Partonope of Blois*, *Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Bevis of Hampton*. In each, he details different aspects of the masculine psychodrama. He concludes that romances demonstrate a masculine subjectivity away from homosocial identity, and more classically 'narcissistic,' or internal. This narcissistic subjectivity prioritizes the self over the external; everything outside the self lacks subjectivity and appears to be hostile or threatening to the male's inner identity.

It seems that male subjectivity requires a female's lack of subjectivity, lack of agency, as he demonstrates in the rape of Melior, and Percival's separation and repudiation of his mother. Neal picks and chooses his Freud, taking the maternal/feminine as a force to be repudiated, but he does not, for example, really discuss the threat of the Oedipal father. He posits instead only the 'good' pre-Oedipal father as important for this development of subjectivity, and denies the hosts of hostile males that populate romance, particularly the giant figures, which his guide, Brewer, in *Symbolic Stories*, explicitly connects to the projection of the threatening father.

It seems odd that Neal should examine romance literature, in a book he explicitly states is "not another book about knights and chivalry." Romance not only features knights as characters, the predominant audience for the texts were either the knightly classes themselves or classes not comfortable with their own position in the hierarchy

and seeking to fashion themselves after knightly values. An argument could be made that the middle-class masculinity Neal is studying would read such texts either for such a reason, or for another way of determining their own masculinity in reflection of or contrast to knightly chivalry, but Neal does not touch upon this matter. Thus this fourth chapter seems an odd match with his less-aristocratic documentary evidence in the preceding ones. Additionally, he only haphazardly applies his own structure—Devereux's 'double discourse'—in tackling the texts themselves. Many of the moments he indicates as key to psychosocial development take place indoors in the texts he uses, while their homosocial development takes place outside. It seems an odd oversight of an aspect that would so clearly underscore his point.

He argues that he did not spend much time considering the contributions of Christianity to this model of masculinity because, "the contributions of religious values are difficult to assess...where religious discourse was everywhere." However, religious discourses touched upon many of the themes he discusses, such as proper self-discipline or husbandry, virtues such as honesty, and sumptuary display, which might have enriched his discussion. He also, in his conclusion, admits he does not spend a lot of effort studying the role of women in the formulation, either ideological or literal, of manliness, which seems another odd omission, considering that several times throughout the text he refers to an essential of masculinity as 'not female'. If we are to accept that masculinity in the romances, for example, follow the Freudian course of

maternal abjection, it is not beyond the pale to expect at least some larger discussion as to what, precisely, falls under that abjected umbrella.