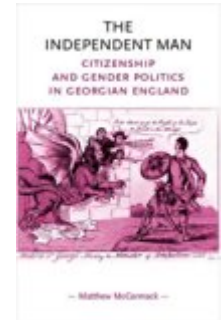


**Matthew McCormack.** *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. ix + 222 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7054-9.



**Reviewed by** David Turner

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The study of masculinity has been a fruitful area of research in early modern gender history over the past ten years or so, with important studies of crime, family, sexuality, and sociability appearing in print. Yet one of the most apparently "masculine" spheres of early modern life--politics--has been relatively neglected in this wave of historical scholarship. While historians of early modern women have done much to explore the political activities and consciousness of their subjects, there has been surprisingly little study of masculinity and politics prior to the Victorian period.

Matthew McCormack sets out to address this neglect in this readable and illuminating account of the role of "manly independence" in the political thought and electoral politics of England from the seventeenth-century Civil War to the Great Reform Act of 1832. In this period, the figure of the "independent man" was idealized as "the epitome of manliness, citizenship and national character," and in political debate, the notion of independence proved remarkably flexible as a means both of criticizing the political status quo and ex-

pressing patriotic loyalty in the face of foreign threat (p. 1). As such, "manly independence" provides an interesting perspective on the political culture of Georgian England and the ways in which political participation and legitimacy were articulated in gendered terms that explicitly excluded women and certain types of "dependent" men, at a time of intense debate about rights, liberties, and membership in the political nation.

The book begins by examining the qualities of independence in the eighteenth century and its social and political meanings. "Independence" comprised an amalgam of attributes, going beyond freedom itself to include certain behavior and manners; plain, straightforward, and sincere manliness; and a sturdy physical demeanor. While the "independent man" was the embodiment of Englishness, not all men fitted the bill. Obligation and dependence, the conditions of recipients of charitable assistance or wage laborers, were anathema to independence and justified exclusion from political life. Only independent men should be allowed to vote as only they were deemed capable of judging conscientiously and

rationally, making them fit to make decisions for those who were not. In the classical republican conception of power, it was only those who were free from the will of others who were considered competent to make decisions necessary to the public good.

The "independent man" was made, not born, and the attributes of independence accrued to members of the social elite, whose superior education, breeding, and property helped to fashion a suitable masculine identity. However, over the course of the period 1640-1832, McCormack argues that there was a major change in the conception of what sorts of people were capable of "independence." Intimately bound up with the growing momentum for parliamentary reform, notions of "independence" slowly became more socially inclusive, with a shift of emphasis from property and personal acquirements that were only accessible to the elite, to "inner" qualities that were potentially accessible to all men. The majority of the book sets out this process of change chronologically, in the process showing the adaptability of concepts of "manly independence" in political debate. Having explored the development of concepts of "manly independence" in the political thought and debates about parliamentary representation of the Civil War period, McCormack shows its importance in the development of "Country" opposition in the Hanoverian period, firstly in response to Robert Walpole's ministry and second—in an interesting account of John Wilkes's political manliness—in the attacks on the Earl of Bute and his ministers in the 1760s. Wilkes proved adept in using the image of the independent man to emphasize the basic libertarianism of freeborn Englishmen who refused to be pushed around by the ruling ministry. English independence was contrasted with the image of the "dependent Scot," embodied by Bute and his cronies. Similar views of foreign "dependence" would be articulated by loyalists in the aftermath of the French Revolution and vilification of the "depen-

dent" effeminate Frenchman was used to stir up popular support for the Napoleonic Wars.

However, by the end of the eighteenth century, fundamental changes in the conceptualization of "manly independence" were apparent. The American Revolution, with its assertion of the rights of all men, had a major effect on English radicals and led to a broadening of "manly independence" to include not just men of property, but all those who possessed a plain, straightforward style of manliness. By the 1790s English radicals were using the language of "independence" to conceptualize political virtue and vice, and this developed into criticisms of Old Corruption in the aftermath of Waterloo. By this time, radical orators emphasized the potential fitness of all men for political inclusion. The Reform Act of 1832 still viewed electoral independence in terms of property, but the concept of independence used by the reformers related also to a specific idea of the citizen, defined by his education, intelligence, respectability, and moral fitness. In this way, the Reform Act is best seen as a continuation of eighteenth-century ideas of "manly independence" rather than the great modernizing measure that Whig historians have claimed.

This is an intricate account of the adaptability and appropriation of political language in the long eighteenth century. Charting the development of "manly independence" shows how notions of gender were bound up with debates about reform. "Independence" was a means of distinguishing between different types of men and, crucially, between men and women who, through this conception of power, were explicitly excluded from the political process. As "manly independence" broadened its constituency, so the political exclusion of women (and others deemed ineligible for full political citizenship such as criminals and the insane) became more noticeable. At one glance, this appears to reinforce the notion of "separate spheres" that has loomed large over eighteenth-century gender history. Yet

McCormack is at pains to qualify this argument. "Separate spheres," he contends, is itself "a political idiom rather than a reflection of social circumstances: reformers emphasized the independence and domestic mastery of humble men in order to make a moral case for wider male access to political rights" (p. 21).

The subject of "manly independence" is an important one and raises questions that go beyond the scope of this book. Certainly, more research needs to be done on its social aspects and how individual men articulated and experienced a sense of "independence." This is a history of ideas rather than experience. Yet readers of this carefully researched and nuanced book can be left with little doubt of the importance of "manly independence" in the political culture of the long eighteenth century, and as an attempt to incorporate masculinity into Georgian politics, and assert the importance of politics to the history of masculinity more generally, this book achieves its goals admirably.

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