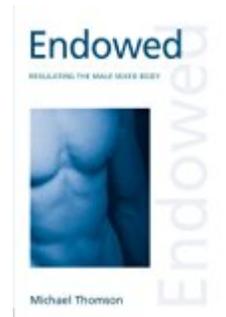


Michael Thomson. *Endowed: Regulating the Male Sexed Body.* New York: Routledge, 2008. x + 194 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-95061-9.



Reviewed by Robert Van Howe

Published on H-Histsex (May, 2008)

In *Endowed*, Michael Thomson takes on the Herculean task of defining masculinity in our culture. Thomson, a professor of law at the University of Keele, United Kingdom, has published widely in the fields of law and gender, sexuality, and medical ethics.[1] Rather than using the trite approach that gender is determined by the celestial body of origin, he attempts to use art, cinema, fiction, advertising, sports, genital surgeries, and artificial insemination as cultural proxies to define masculinity. He begins with the "sexed body" as the "manly" masculinity that is sportive, active, impenetrable, invincible, potent, independent, self-reliant, strong, robust, tough, and dominant over women. This is referred throughout the book as the hegemonic masculinity. This is the idealized male.

The contrast to hegemonic masculinity is the reproductive male: the one that procreates. The reproductive male is represented by Felix Dern, the main character in Jim Crace's novel *Six* (2003), who fathers a child with every coital act; the sperm donor who provides fecundity to the infertile couple; the phallus that escapes surgical alter-

ation; and the little blue pill that combats erectile dysfunction. It may also include the man that is in touch with his feminine side and will talk about relationships. In the cultural discourses Thomson analyzes, women's bodies and femininity are believed to lack integrity and are associated with danger, disease, and pollution, and the reproductive male is considered to be tainted with these qualities. The concept of gender is cultural, relational, and dynamic. Individuals are encouraged to conform to these stereotypes, but too often these concepts of gender collide.

The second chapter contrasts the differing discourses on male and female circumcision. Thomson points out that in the case of males, the risks and harms inherent in the procedure are ignored, while the risks of not having the procedure are inflated. In the case of female circumcision, discussions focus on the pain, harm, and adverse impact on reproduction. The similarities in cultural meaning and surgical outcomes between male and female genital cutting are rarely acknowledged. The cultural importance is that the foreskin (soft and sensitive) is feminized flesh that

must be removed from the male, while the clitoris is masculinized flesh that must be removed from the female. Circumcision of males also carries with it the bonus of pain and risk that defines "manly masculinity" and male privilege; it pushes the male infant in the direction of the hegemonic masculinity.

In the third chapter, Thomson uses the dichotomy of gender in the hazardous workplace. The hegemonic male was considered invulnerable to the hazards of toxic exposure, while women of reproductive potential were not. Women were, therefore, excluded from these higher paying, yet hazardous, jobs.

The roll-out of Viagra as a treatment for erectile dysfunction is the focus of the fourth chapter. The marketing of Viagra emphasized the dichotomy between potent/virile and impotent/nonvirile masculinity, with a focus on sexual performance (erection and penetration) as opposed to fertility. If masculinity is defined primarily through performance, then a man's failure to consummate is a failure of masculinity that needs to be addressed. Thomson argues that the female partner is sidelined in the discussion, since Viagra is not about her sexual pleasure but about "their" relationship, and he quotes one legal commentator as stating that "'it is easier to find references to women getting pleasure and satisfaction from housework than ... [from] sexual pleasure'" (p. 87).[2] How far Thomson agrees with this statement is unclear, but it seems highly dubious; as his own coverage of its marketing establishes, much of the advertising for Viagra stresses its beneficial effects on relationships, assuring men that it will enable them to give their partner more sexual satisfaction than ever before.[3] It is true that this sort of advertising is directed at men and is yet another way of assuring them that the drug really will give them stronger and longer lasting erections, but the proposition that women are commonly represented as more interested in housework than sex seems rather outdated.

In chapter 5, Thomson deals with the anonymity of sperm donors. Again, Thomson contrasts how gender alters perception. Egg donation is a major ordeal, while sperm donation is the product of the (paid) public masturbator, the medical student short on cash, or the egotistical broadcaster who wants to spread his DNA as liberally as his voice. Thomson criticizes Daniel Callahan for stating that "there is something symbolically destructive about using anonymous sperm donors to help women have children apart from a permanent marital relationship with the father," and points out that more than half of fertility problems are on the male side.[4] What has evolved is a movement away from donor anonymity, the effect of which has been to decrease the number of donors, undermine any rehabilitation of the infertile couple as the reproductive heterosexual family, and further undermine the husband's role as father. The thinking behind this movement is that a child's right to learn its genetic inheritance outweighs a donor's right to privacy. It appears to both Thomson and me that there are other ways to get this information without violating the donor's privacy.

The sixth chapter discusses the role of sport in reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity as the ideal. Sports allow men the opportunity to learn the values of aggression, competition, and discipline, while women learn to be spectators, to support and admire. It is a forum in which men can prepare for the competitive public arena of life and the male dominance they should expect there. It is here that Thomson makes his most poignant observations. He examines the ruling in the British case *R. v. Brown* (the notorious Spanner Case), in which sixteen men were fined or given lengthy prison sentences for engaging in consensual S&M. Thomson particularly examines the way in which the courts considered potentially harmful yet fully consensual sadomasochistic sex in contrast with other consensual yet potentially

harmful (and often really injurious) pursuits, such as sports.

It is difficult to ignore the omnipresence of implicit homoeroticism in close physical contact that men have with other men in sporting events. This may explain the high level of homophobia in the sporting world. Second, there is masochism in sports in the form of rigorous training and effort ("No pain, no gain!"). Finally, many sports are violent and dangerous. Pugilism is an excellent example. It is hard to picture why prizefighting would be legal and consensual sexual practices would not, other than to distance the "manly" from the "perverted." It is emblematic of the inconsistency that Lord Templeman in his appeal judgment stated that "ritual circumcision, tattooing, ear piercing and violent sports are lawful activities," (p. 137) while ruling that consensual sex involving violence was illegal. Even more disturbing than such legal anomalies is the high rate of sexual abuse, rape, and gang rape associated with athletes. It appears to be an extension of the aggression and violence cultivated in their sport and proving manliness in the form of power, control, and dominance.

In the final chapter, Thomson uses the art of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002) to explore issues of genital sexual differentiation and ambiguous genitalia. Our culture defines male and female, but has trouble with ambiguity in this realm. Consequently, intersex bodies demand resolution, and surgery that commits a body in one direction is often performed shortly after birth. Thomson seeks to bring the law into this discussion, arguing that in American law the penis is constructed as rational while the vagina is constructed as relational. To me, however, this effort comes across as halfhearted.[5]

Although the individual essays are full of stimulating insights and sharp observation, the overall thesis of *Endowed* was never clear to me, as the contrasts kept shifting. At some points, hegemonic masculinity is compared with the re-

productive male, while at others with the reproductive female. The distinction between the sexed male and the reproductive male with erectile dysfunction was less apparent than I would have liked. In addition, the examples around which Thomson builds his book vary in their effectiveness.

While reading this book and looking for synthesis, I happened to listen to some Jim Croce. His songs ranged from the raucous "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown" and "You Don't Mess around with Jim" to the tender "Operator" and "I'll Have to Say I Love You in a Song." The first two songs exemplify the hegemonic male, while the latter two emphasize emotions and relationships that are antimale. Like the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) observing that women preferred gentiles as lovers because they were not circumcised, such songs suggest that women prefer men who have emotions. The machismo of the hegemonic male leaves women cold. Just as women put on makeup for other women, men pursue hegemonic masculinity to impress other men.

Such a perspective brings up the issue of homoeroticism to which Thomson returns repeatedly. Neither a sexed male nor a reproductive male, the gay male is an enigma that our culture does not know what to do with. Like the intersexed infant, the gay male must be pushed into a gender classification with which our culture feels comfortable, but there is no clear evidence that this is happening.

Endowed has unresolved issues, but that might be the point. Defining masculinity in our culture is a Herculean task and Thomson's post-modern strategy of zooming in on specific points of tension may well be more revealing than attempting an encyclopedic coverage. The weakness of this approach, however, is that he never clearly defines his theses and antitheses, and does not achieve a final synthesis. The book has a number of interesting insights, especially the chapters on

circumcision and sports, but it does not come together as a definite thesis. Part of the reason for this is that several of the chapters appeared originally as separate journal articles and remain independent essays rather than component parts of a cohesive whole. Nonetheless, *Endowed* will be a valuable resource for gender studies courses and should interest anybody interested in the dynamics of masculinity in Western/Anglophone cultures.

Notes

[1]. See also his earlier paper, Michael Thomson, "Masculinity, Reproductivity and Law," Cardiff Centre for Ethics, Law and Society, April 2005, available at <http://www.ccels.cf.ac.uk/archives/publications/2005/thomsonpaper.pdf>.

[2]. The quotation comes from Reg Graycar, "Sex, Golf and Stereotypes: Measuring, Valuing and Imagining the Body in Court," *Torts Law Journal* 10 (2002), p. 3.

[3]. This point is made by Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chap. 10, and it is also the thrust of the advertisements for Viagra that clutter our in-boxes.

[4]. Daniel Callahan, "Bioethics and Fatherhood," in *Legal and Ethical Issues in Human Reproduction*, edited by B. Steinbock (Aldershot: Ashgate Dartmouth, 2002).

[5]. The issue is explored in more detail in Marie Fox and Michael Thomson, "Cutting It: Surgical Interventions and the Sexing of Children," *Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender* 12 (Fall 2005): 81-97.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Robert Van Howe. Review of Thomson, Michael. *Endowed: Regulating the Male Sexed Body*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14510>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.