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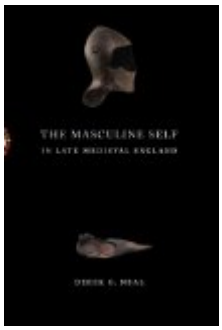
Derek G. Neal. *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xiii + 303 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-56957-4.



Reviewed by Isabel Davis

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Commissioned by Margaret McGlynn (University of Western Ontario)

Derek Neal's *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* is a book of stories. Collected here is a disparate range of mad and marvelous tales of late-medieval life and especially the psychic life of men; "the more interesting the better," says Neal (p. 30). And these stories are told well, in a prose style characterized by an admirable clarity and care. The effect is a readable one. Whether relating a court case or describing the field of gender studies, Neal's style is accessible, engaging, and gently conversational. As a whole the book is ambitious and aims for comprehensiveness, considering all men: lay and clerical, young and old, both in the town and in the country. It takes up the question of the social expectations that governed men's lives as well as the ways that inner lives and male fantasies were represented. It gathers court records, letters, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, romances, encyclopaedia, moral and medical texts. This is a contribution to a growing field of masculinity studies which is being appended to the histories of women. Neal is clear about and responsive to the work that has been done by feminists, work which made masculinity visible as a category of analysis; he is interesting on the ways in which the sexes relate to each other as well as thinking through men's relationships with other men. The book, as will be clear from this *précis*, is a big sweep and there is very little that it does not discuss.

The book is framed by an introduction and a conclusion which offer a thorough theoretical and historiographical rationale for histories of masculinity. The book's chapters travel from the historical to the literary, from social attitudes to inner, psychoanalytical patterns. They operate together somewhat telescopically, each emerging and expanding on those that go before. The first two chapters are dominated by the ideal figures of the true-man and the husband(man) respectively. The first of these rethinks Richard Firth Green's discussion of the Middle English meanings of "truth" and, conversely, "falseness" in order to think about masculine reputation and economic standing. The second chapter looks at the word "husband" and the way its much broader se-

mantic range in Middle English demonstrates how late medieval culture considered the roles of male spouse and the land and livestock manager together. It compares and contrasts this lay ideal of masculinity with the figure of the priest, necessarily asking what it means that, of these two gendered ideals, only one was expected to be sexually active. It argues, though, for the close relationship of the lay and clerical worlds. Chapter 3 then moves on to consider sex and gender in relation to the male body. This begins with a discussion of the figure of the miller Symkyn in Chaucer's ***Reeve's Tale***, who has an extraordinary body indeed, before turning to the bodies described in the consistory court cause papers and then representations of the body in more prescriptive and taxonomic literature. The final chapter hastily dashes around a number of Middle English romances accumulating Oedipal structures. Its central conclusion is that these narratives, in juxtaposition to men's extensive social obligations in the world, offered "the fantasized or idealized interior self [that] should seek to deny or repudiate relation in its very definition" (p. 239). The book's general move towards the inner life is presumably the reason for the title's offering the ***self*** as the object of investigation.

The book has, then, a huge scope. Its wealth of evidence will offer students a good survey of some salient aspects of medieval masculine life and some suggestive starting points for further study. The earlier chapters, which look closer and treat the social and legal evidence, are more successful than those that come later, and especially the last, because they pay attention to language, context, and date. Neal's fashionable instinct to discuss the historical records as fictive is surely right and he is good at interpreting their narrative impulses. However, the later chapters and his consideration of sources which have been more traditionally classified as fiction are more historically sketchy as they move into Freudian psychoanalysis. Sentences about apples and sacks, about times and places, about words and their Middle English meanings are displaced by more general, unlocated discussion: "This plot sequence dramatizes the subject's confusion about desire, how desire for Woman uncomfortably recalls desire for Mother" (p. 207). In the discussion of literary evidence the earlier attention to the specificities of Middle English expression disappears so that literature, even poetry, is understood straightforwardly as plot structure, as it is indeed, in the above quotation. There is very little citation from any of the literary texts and what there is is given not in the English verse in which it was written but in Neal's modern idiomatic prose. In one place, a dynamic observed in late medieval writing is illustrated by quotation from a modern work of fiction by Alice Munro (p. 235). Whilst this avoidance of Middle English verse might be perceived as helpful to beginning students, it is misleading about the proper use and possibilities of poetry, and the importance of words as historical evidence.

Because its frames of reference are large, ***The Masculine Self*** inevitably leaves more to be said and more detailed analysis to be done. I found myself wishing, though, that discussion would pause and consider fewer things more fully, deepening and complicating its analysis. I give here just two examples: for Neal, Smykyn the Miller, in Chaucer's ***Reeve's Tale***, shows Chaucer's ***own*** take on the male body and the way in which it intersects with masculine social pretensions. And yet the ***Reeve's Tale*** is part of ***The Canterbury Tales*** and Smykyn is purportedly the personal nightmare of another of Chaucer's male characters, the Reeve, who is involved in yet another homosocial rivalry with the Miller who rides alongside him on the pilgrimage. Symkyn's phallic weaponry says less about him, in fact, and more about the Reeve and ***his*** sexual and social anxieties. These entanglements cannot, of course, be explored in the bare three paragraphs afforded to the discussion.

Given the speed with which they are also treated, Neal's readings of the romances are similarly necessarily reductive. Neal reads Gawain's contest with the Green Knight, for example, as a struggle against the authority of a father figure. It may or it may not be. But the evidence produced here is rather weak and amounts to an exposition of the main plot elements coupled with universalizing suppositions about the ways that the Green Knight's behaviors might be understood as those of a father. We learn for example that "[h]is original challenge is like a cruel teasing game inflicted by parent on child: hit me so that I have an excuse to hit you back" (p. 233). This is an oddly specific dynamic to essentialize as paternal (many fathers, of course, don't behave like this) and it might describe all manner of other rivalries. First and most obviously this poem is about a lot more, and has more interestingly ***medieval*** things to say about the construction of masculinity, and about the psychology of desire than is represented here. Neal ends the last chapter with the announcement that "Relation and desire took different forms; we do not appreciate the varied texture of any subjectivity by reducing 'desire' to a monolithic factor" (p. 239). He tells us, then, that the inner life of medieval men was complicated but this is not exactly what is demonstrated in these final chapters, which do not sufficiently delineate complexity, difference, and textural variety.

My final quibble is about the way in which this book represents the views of Neal's colleagues and readers. Neal usually likes to position his own argument against a common fallacy, which he argues is widely held. For example, Neal asserts that "scholarly opinion" has so far argued that the celibate clergy were understood as unmanly because they were prohibited from carrying weapons, marrying, and having sex (p. 90). This opinion is then pluckily resisted. But this opposition is overstated and arrived at from a misreading of arguments like P. H. Cullum's on the married clergy and ignoring others like, say, Glenn Burger's on the "hybridity" of marriage in this period.[1] Neal's own argument is a good one--that practically, at the local level, social expectations of lay men and clerics could be quite similar, sometimes confusedly so, and often brought them into dispute. But his stark dismissal of the entire critical and historiographical field doesn't admit what so many have found out about the cultural dominance of, and the muscle behind, the arguments for virginity and celibacy in this period. These arguments do not contradict those in ***The Masculine Self***, but they might make it more nuanced and genuinely discursive.

The book's introduction begins with an anecdote about the responses which Neal has had to his project. This opening is indicative of Neal's approach which (often helpfully) justifies historical study of this kind with reference to modern attitudes and misconceptions. But these two anecdotes are used to define the associations "called up for most people (inside and outside the academy) by the phrase 'medieval masculinity'" (p. 1). Like Neal's caricature of "scholarly opinion", the reader's views are impressionistically imagined. The predilection for the pronouns "we" and "us" constructs the implied reader, like "most people," as someone who begins with some rather unreflective ideas but who, on reading this book, joins a community of others who unanimously agree with its findings. Many readers will not identify with the opinions against which Neal positions his own; they may or may not be convinced of the various readings that Neal offers here. But, if ***The Masculine Self*** should be preserved for as long as the medieval texts it discusses, I wonder what its future readers will make of the portrait that Neal draws of this early twenty-first century "us"?

Note

[1]. P. H.Cullum, "Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England," in ***Masculinity in Medieval Europe***, ed. Dawn M. Hadley (London: Longman, 1999), 178-96; Glenn Burger, ***Chaucer's Queer Nation***, Medieval Cultures 34

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

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