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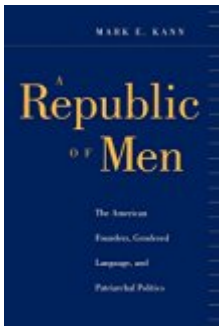

Mark E. Kann. *A Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language and Patriarchal Politics.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. x+ 238 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-4713-1.

Reviewed by Catherine Kaplan

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In *A Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics*, Mark E. Kann argues that a "grammar of manhood" formed the centerpiece of the founders' efforts to create order within the republic and within America's potentially unruly male citizens themselves. This grammar, Kann suggests, entailed both a hierarchy among men and the subordination of women to men; these elements, he concludes, were woven so firmly into the fabric of the new nation that they continue to characterize political and social relationships today.

Drawing on a wide range of works from the fields of history, sociology, and political science, Kann ambitiously and often persuasively argues that virtually every element of Revolutionary and early national society, from Shay's Rebellion to African colonization schemes to the War of 1812, can be productively viewed through the lens of gender analysis. He describes the creation of a "hegemonic masculinity"; "the American founders," he argues, "used gendered language to stigmatize disorderly males and democrats as effeminate and childish, to encourage them to settle into family responsibility and sober citizenship, to foster fraternal trust between citizens and their representatives, and to legitimize the extralegal prerogative of exceptional leaders" (p. 3). Kann argues that the use of this grammar of manhood was occasionally self-conscious but more often not; intrigued by the "psychodynamics of early American political thought," Kann argues that "American men had powerful unconscious passions and gendered assumptions that infused patriarchal meaning into public phrases such as 'All men are created equal'" (p. 19).

In accord with other contemporary gender scholarship, Kann's study presents the eighteenth century as a transitional era, during which the patriarchal ideal underwent significant change. Kann argues that the American Revolution "stimulated the development of new gender discourses and alternative models of manhood," models which he briefly limns as the "genteel patriarch," the "republican man," and "the self-made man." Acknowledging a plethora of "economic, religious, and regional variations," as well as the uncertain

status of African and Indian men, Kann argues that there were, nonetheless, certain "consensual norms": men were to be self-supporting and to have families; they were to "situate themselves in intergenerational time," proving themselves worthy of their forefathers and devoted to their progeny; they were to "occupy a fixed place in continental space," preferably cultivating the land as they cultivated the nation, and they were to seek fraternity--the ideal man, Kann writes, "disciplined his passions, impulses, and avarice to win other men's respect and establish fraternal membership" (pp. 30-43). As well as sketching these affirmative elements, Kann also posits, in accord with such historians as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Susan Juster, and Joan Gundersen, that manhood was almost always an "oppositional concept"; the founders defined their ideals of manhood against such figures as the woman, the boy, and the African slave.

Kann's broadly drawn but suggestive middle chapters are devoted to developing a typology of manhood in the Revolutionary and early national eras. The founders, he argues, relied on four stock figures as the elements of their social, political, and personal vision: the Bachelor, the Family Man, the Better Sort, and the Heroic Man. The progression is from virtue to vice. The Bachelor, Kann suggests, was a deplored figure, a creature of effeminacy, selfishness and immaturity who represented all that needed to be controlled within society and within the individual man. The second type, the Family Man, consituted the bulwark of the republic; his "presumptive caution, maturity, responsibility, sobriety, and orderly conduct legitimized his power over women and earned him republican citizenship" (p. 79). Kann's third type--the description of which makes the reader wish for greater attention to the possible intersection of partisan politics and ideals of manhood in the era--is "the Better Sort," men who "reconciled aristocratic manhood and republicanism" and could be trusted to make important political and cultural decisions; it was they who were "skilled at mediating individual liberty and fraternal order" (pp. 110-12). Finally, Kann writes, there were the few "Heroic Men" who rose to the challenge of extraordinary times and, often acting outside the confines of public opinion and even law, worked for the good of the republic. This figure, though necessary to the success of the republic, retained vestiges of monarchical power and character. "Like a father who mixed discipline and love," Kann writes, "the Heroic Man infused authority with tenderness to personalize politics and promote citizen confidence in him." The importance of the Heroic Man, Kann argues, demonstrates that alongside the "institutional republic of men and laws" there existed "a symbolic politics that legitimized democratic deference to leadership prerogative" (pp. 148-50).

These four types, Kann concludes, constituted a "grammar of manhood" intended "to encourage men to reform themselves, school their sons to exercise liberty with restraint, and restore and reinforce order in public life" (p. 155). In the succeeding two hundred years, he insists, "the relationship between manhood and politics has hardly changed. American males of all races, religions, classes, and regions continue to build hierarchies that stigmatize disorderly men, provide varying degrees of respect and influence to men in the middle, and afford great authority to the few on top" (p. 156). "The modern rhetoric of liberty, equality, and democracy," he continues, "has not inhibited American men from complying with a seemingly iron law of male oligarchy: a few men rule, the majority of men consent and obey, and marginal men mostly accept subordination" (p. 157). Such assertions render this concluding chapter perhaps Kann's least persuasive; his suggestion that "marginal men mostly accept subordination," for example, surely doesn't do justice to the way in which competing ideals of masculinity--even when those ideals also contain hierarchies--have served and continue to serve as foundations of resistance and rebellion to more mainstream culture. More generally, Kann's tendency to argue

both that America's patterns fit within models of manhood which transcend time and geography and that they arise from the specific needs and ideologies of the founders can't do justice to either approach.

A Republic of Men is clearly written and intellectually ambitious; whom its audience within the historical community might be is, however, an open question. Those already involved in the study of gender and the early republic will find little new research or analysis here; though sympathetic to Kann's sense that, as Joan Scott would have it, "politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics," they may well be frustrated by the book's tendency to collect current scholarship rather than advancing any one element of it. That same historiographical quality may render the book useful to those just beginning to be curious about gender in the early republic, but Kann's tendency toward sweeping statements and ambiguous causality ("the founders," he writes, "instituted a new republic in which the prior identification of women with blood, childbirth, and menstruation would gradually give way to the Victorian era's bloodless images of female passionlessness and political influence" [p. 51]) and his efforts to include, often through brief, highly selective quotation, all elements of early national experience in his "grammar of manhood" may not win over those skeptical of gender studies' specific analytic or descriptive power.

Nonetheless, the sweep and blithe rapidity of Kann's argument offers strengths as well as weaknesses. He glosses a remarkable number of scholarly studies of gender, the Revolutionary era, and the early republic, and his willingness to combine sources as varied as Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* and a sociological study of a Chicago restaurant can serve as a useful corrective to historical parochialism and timidity. Kann's broad, capitalized figures of the Bachelor, Family Man, Better Sort, and Heroic Man invite--as he is surely aware they would--a running argument from any reader insistent on nuance and complexity; yet that exercise itself is far from useless, as Kann's typology sparks new thoughts about the array of artisans, backwoodsmen, would-be Federalist patriarchs, and black-clad Methodist circuit riders who seem to clamber behind and between Kann's cast of four. Kann's work, finally, is indeed an assertive and scholarly entrant into the current argument of whether the early American republic was essentially or contingently masculine. Those who turn to it in search of a creative and provocative essay on the meanings of manhood in the early republic and in current scholarship will not come away disappointed.

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