
Marginalia

“I Wanna Be a Medieval Macho Man”

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D. M. Hadley, editor *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*; Longman, London; 1999

William Marshall; Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire 1147 - 1219, David Crouch; Longman, London 1990

If a man is alone in the middle of a forest, and there's no woman around to hear him speak, is he still wrong?

Or, in terms of the study of medieval history, is the current enthusiasm for examining the admittedly long ignored role of women drowning out the voices of men? I'm not alone in asking this touchy question, I was somewhat relieved to discover, when at a previous year's International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds another scholar openly (and bravely) expressed his growing boredom with the overwhelming number of “woman's studies” papers being presented at the conference.

This was later echoed at a totally different sort of academic meeting, when I delivered a paper at the University of Liverpool for a literary conference on detective fiction. The preponderant amount of “woman's studies” in the work of popular detective and crime fiction dominated the number of papers being given, ranging from thoughtful and intriguing to downright extremist and repetitive. The sole paper delivered on the shifting portrayals of male personalities in crime fiction over the past three decades I found to be one of the most interesting, while the almost gingerly apologetic tone of the two men presenting their paper made my heart ache.

So while I was thumbing through the latest Addison Wesley Longman book catalog, I jumped for the phone to damn near beg

a review copy of *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, a collection of works edited by D. M. Hadley. This book launches a new series in gender history studies by Longman, "Women and Men in History", and didn't disappoint my hopeful expectations.

Dr. Dawn Hadley, a Lecturer in Historical Archeology at the University of Sheffield, has written a long, comprehensive introduction, which began with the statement: "Much attention has been focused on medieval women in recent years, but although this work is extremely valuable it has not really been about gender; it has served to 'add' women to the historical picture(...) To develop the study of gender in the Middle Ages we need to move beyond the separate study of women, and in order to do so we have to address the gendered identity of men. There is a growing awareness that medieval men, and medieval masculinities, equally require theorizing and detailed analysis."

To which my immediate reaction of, "Right on, sister!", was tempered a few paragraphs later: "It is to be noted that the so-called 'men's studies' have made little impact on this collection. This results from a general unease with the 'men's studies' programme, which has recently been criticized as a reassertion of male prerogatives, as a re-presentation and repackaging of a fundamentally unchanged 'male power', and as the perpetuation of reductionist and essentialist notions of masculinity; its proponents have also failed to respond to issues raised by feminist scholarship."

I must confess to a personal bias here; there are few things in research I loathe more than political correctness. As a woman and a feminist, I'm uneasy with dictating terms of what may and may not be considered appropriate constraints for any controversial issue, including "men's studies".

However, even with that proviso, none of the baker's dozen of essays in this book failed to impress. These essays have been divided into three categories; "Attaining Masculinity", "Lay Men and Church Men: Sources of Tension?" and "Masculinity and the Written Word, Text and Context". They range from generalized surveys of behavior to tightly focused examinations of particular individuals; from the earliest Middle Ages to the

Reformation; from Europe to Byzantium - a truly ambitious project.

The central emphasis of this study is intended not only to show how medieval chroniclers utilized stereotypes of men (and women by contrast) for their own age, but how modern scholarship had shaped current stereotypes, in the attempt to re-examine and challenge conventionalized ideas about the roles and relationships of medieval men.

The first of these essays, by the editor and her co-author, J. M. Moore, is a medieval archeological examination of grave goods and their symbolic values; that in the absence of biological sexing of skeletons, the presence of weapons or jewelry has been often erroneously used to assume gender, and grave goods not associated with either gender, such as pottery or buckles, make the traditional use of grave goods as a factor for sex determination absurd. That more than just the goods themselves (or lack of any) is needed for an interpretation of the individuals with whom it was buried. While the language used by the authors is academically dry to the point of anemia, the ideas are fresh and clearly presented.

In one of the few essays on individuals, W.M. Aird's essay, "Frustrated Masculinity: The Relationship between William the Conqueror and his Eldest Son" is a fascinating study of this complex son-father conflict. I can't help feeling sorry for poor Robert Curthose, urinated on by his boorish brothers Rufus and Henry only to have his father defend his younger brothers. In the end, he didn't succeed to his father's throne, but was packed off to prison in Cardiff Castle in 1106 to write Welsh poetry for the next twenty-eight years until his death.

P.J.P. Goldberg examines the complicated relationship between masters and their servants and apprentices in Later Medieval England, while M. Bennett and S. Tougher provide an unsettling contrast between the conceptions of masculinity in military men in England and Northern France and the portrayal of eunuchs in Byzantium. The prejudice and social cruelty beyond castration Byzantine eunuchs endured was chilling ("A Byzantine maxim ran: if you have a eunuch kill him; if you don't, buy one and kill him". pg. 92). Bennett's examination of medieval men's opinion

on what made a man masculine is well thought out, but does on occasion include some interpretations I find a bit too imaginative: "The Norman monk, Orderic Vitalis, blamed the notorious rake, Fulk le Rechin (the Irritable), count of Anjou for introducing the elaborate style of shoe with long toes, claiming that it was to hide his deformed feet. But there were other implications for the wearer's virility: when tied back to the shin this style was clearly phallic." (p. 80)

It is? That is one interpretation that would never have occurred to me, and doesn't seem any more "clearly phallic" than other transitory fashions, like the tricorner hat or 1970's platform shoes. Sometimes, in the words of Sigmund Freud, a cigar is just a cigar.

"It takes a man six months to bring the nocturnal emission of his semen under control: he must eat two loaves a day, drink as much water as he needs, take three or four hours sleep... In the final stages, he should cut down on the water, and take up strapping lead plates onto his genitals at night." The advice of the fifth century moral expert, John Cassian, starts off Part Two with a bang, so to speak, with C. Leyser's essay, "Masculinity in Flux; Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages". This essay remains one of my favorite in this collection, written in a clean, lively prose. J. L. Nelson's "Monks, Secular Men and Masculinity, c. 900" not only provides an overview of how secular men expressed their masculinity, and what difference it made when a warrior aristocracy became a Christian elite, but quite refreshingly directly points out flaws in modern research:

"Historians should perhaps have paid more attention than they have to how masculinity was successively *reconstructed* in the early Middle Ages. There is quite a large body of work, especially from North America, on women's history in this period which, valuable as it is, has not dealt with gender, hence has not looked at masculinity." He later uses the views of King Alfred's contemporary biographer, Asser, in comparison with Professor Alfred Smyth's interpretations in his book, *King Alfred the Great*, published by Oxford in 1995. Asser wrote of King Alfred's occasional attacks of debilitating pain in a way that would convince his audience of the king's fitness to rule, by

contending that these attacks were imposed by God at Alfred's own request to ensure Alfred's humility without crippling his effectiveness as a king. Professor Smyth, Nelson observes, being repulsed by this slur on King Alfred's reputation insists Asser's "Life of Alfred" must be a fraud, as such a "pious wimp" could never have won the support of his battle-hardened warriors. Again, it seems modern notions of masculinity come into conflict with medieval opinions.

"The more recent emergence of gender studies has further complicated research into human sexual behaviour. Do apparently fundamental biological distinctions between men and women determine distinctive male and female behaviours? Or are masculinity and femininity also primarily constructed categories?" (pg. 144) R. Balzaretti's essay, "Men and Sex in Tenth Century Italy" echoes Nelson's concern with the spin modern interpretations give to medieval thought. "... (M)ale sexuality is completely foreign territory to historians of early medieval Italy. This lack of research is not due to an absence of evidence of sexual activity and opinions about it... Nor is it the case that an interest in sex is a twentieth-century habit unknown to early medieval people. Rather it stems from the conventions of modern history writing, embodied in its desire to be properly academic, and its understanding that where there is sex there are always women and never men". The writings of Raterius of Verona, Atto of Vercelli, and Luitprand of Cremona, three Italian tenth century bishops, provide Balzaretti enough material for some intriguing observations.

R. N. Swanson's "Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation" and P. H. Cullum's "Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England" conclude the second part of this collection, both dealing with the theological idea of creating a separate sex and gender from male or female for the clergy, Swanson primarily dealing with monks while Cullum examines the contradictory concepts of the secular clergy, with an analogy between modern white/black racial prejudice and the conflict of the clergy between being monks and "real men".

The third part of the collection is allocated to three essays on the written word, the first, M. Chinca's "Women and Hunting-Birds

are Easy to Tame: Aristocratic Masculinity and the Early German Love-Lyric”, defining masculinity in relation to its opposite, femininity, and how twelfth century German nobles made sense of their own masculinity. The other two, AM. J. Ailes’s “The Medieval Male Couple and the Language of Homosociality” and J. P. Haseldine’s “Love, Separation and Male Friendship: Words and Actions in Saint Anselm’s Letters to his Friends”, examine images and misinterpretations of homosexuality in the Middle Ages. Ailes undertakes to “demonstrate that a number of recent studies of medieval homosexuality proceed from a series of fundamental misunderstandings of the conventions of medieval literary texts. I will show that the language forms part of the public affirmation of masculine identity, an identity realized in the concepts of a man’s relationship with other men”, and does so quite well using several *chansons de geste* to draw a distinction between homosociality and homosexuality.

Where Ailes concentrates on the emotional relationship between secular men, primarily warriors, Haseldine examines the writing of the clergy, in particular, Saint Anselm of Canterbury. “Here monks, clerics and bishops... speak of the union of their souls, of the fusion of their hearts in the intense heat of love, of intimate and unspoken knowledge of one another’s thoughts and feelings. From declarations of the simple need for physical presence to heightened visions of the metaphysical union of souls, this, to modern ears at least, is the intimate, private language of the lover.” (pg. 239) A stereotypical image of the frustrated and homoerotic world of the clergy persists even today. But a better understanding of the medieval monastic life quickly deflates these misconceptions; medieval letter writing and letter collections were a fashionable medium of thought for a broad audience, written in a stylish and intellectual tradition designed to be preserved for posterity, comparable to the popularity of modern day novels. Quite often, many of these intensely passionate letters were written between men who had never even met. Love and friendship were inextricable (or as Aelred of Rievaulx wrote, “There can be love without friendship, but friendship without love is impossible”), and love between strangers was considered normal. Ardent declarations of love between personal acquaintances carried as much warmth when it was between complete strangers or monastic communities in

general. These expressions of affection are not so much reflections of the inner emotions of their writers as they are in forming social bonds, political allegiances and definitions of one’s own role in a group identity. Placed into such a context, the assumption of homosexuality is as erroneous as Jerry Falwell’s insistence that Tinky Winky of the Telly Tubbies is obviously gay.

All in all, this collection is a very welcome breath of fresh air, doing as much to expand understanding of medieval thought as it is to call into question modern stereotypes when filtering the past through current popular biases and preconceptions. A definite “keeper”.

William Marshall could well be considered as one of the primary examples of masculine archetypes for the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. Several other excellent works on the life of William Marshall have already been written [T. L. Jarman’s “William Marshall, First Earl of Pembroke and Regent of England” (Oxford 1930), Sydney Painter’s “William Marshall” (Baltimore 1933), J. Crossland’s “William the Marshall, the Last Great Feudal Baron” (London 1962), and George Duby’s “Guillaume le Marechal, ou le meilleur chevalier du monde” (Paris 1984)], so at first glance David Crouch’s “William Marshall; Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire 1147 - 1219” (Longman 1990) would seem superfluous. Happily, it isn’t

If there is a flaw in this book, I’m hard pressed to find one. David Crouch writes with a flair and clarity many novelists would envy. His prose is fresh, with such an engaging immediacy and affection for his subject that it made this book a genuine pleasure to read.

But the real genius behind this work is that it isn’t simply a well-written rehash of the *Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*, the primary source of information about William Marshall’s life and career. David Crouch, now a Senior Lecturer in History at North Riding College, Scarborough (U of Leeds) was formerly based at the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London, and has obviously put his digging skills to good use. He has used many other contemporary sources of information to

compare to the *Histoire*, most importantly, sixty-seven of the Marshal's own charters surviving in archives in Ireland, Britain and France, to correct errors or intentional prevarication on the part of its author, and to fill in gaps in the narrative. These give quite a deeper, more complicated version of the Marshal than any previous work.

Crouch freely acknowledges his great debt to Syndey Painter's seminal work, while noting that it was published half a century ago, and did much to foster the distorted stereotype of the Marshal as just another typical military baron of his age; illiterate, congenial if rather obtuse, socially naive while adhering to noble codes of chivalry in love and war. A closer look at the Marshal and the age he lived in reveal quite a different picture. Illiteracy among men of his own class was uncommon, the Marshall wasn't quite the blind advocate of chivalry as his biographer or Painter might want us to believe, and a man born a younger, penniless son of minor nobility didn't rise to become one of the richest, most powerful barons of his age as well as regent of England by being thick but lucky. The politics of Angevin England and twelfth century Europe were far more complicated than Painter interpreted; William Marshall survived and thrived because he was intelligent, sophisticated, often ruthless and devious.

I was also intrigued by Crouch's assessment of Georges Duby's work on the Marshal. Duby relied solely on the *Histoire* and the historical notes of its editor, Paul Meyer, nothing else, and made numerous errors in chronology and genealogy as a result. "Duby's work, if rich in insight, fails to provide any serious rethinking of the man's career nor does it present any new evidence, indeed in total it is downright misleading: he takes from the *Histoire* that which confirms his preconceptions about aristocratic society and ignores the rest. Perhaps no historian is entirely guiltless of this, but Duby's Marshal is a warning of how selective historical writing can distort the evidence in a most unacceptable way." (As a personal aside, I met Georges Duby at his office at the College de France in Paris shortly before his death regarding work I was doing on Eleanor of Aquitaine. Dr. Duby was indeed a charming, generous man, but when I asked him for his source to a particularly controversial statement he had made on her life, he simply smiled his famous Uncle

Georges smile and said, "I just know." There wasn't much I could say to that, but it did leave me with a lasting suspicion of the validity of his work.)

Crouch covers the Earl's biography in minute detail, using the *Histoire* as the skeleton on which to build up muscle and blood to give the story life and energy. The book also includes two Appendices, listing the Knights of William Marshall, a general bibliography, maps, and detailed genealogical tables. The first four chapters of this book trace the Marshall's life from earliest childhood to his death seventy-two years later in 1219, "Childhood and Squirehood", "The Household Knight", "The Making of a Magnate, 1186-1205", and "The Making of a Regent". It begins even before William's birth, with his father, John Marshal, himself a more complex man than modern historians have properly credited. Even the famous story of how King Stephen, being besieged at Newbury, threatened to kill his hostage, the young William, if the siege were not lifted, only to have his bluff called by a seemingly heartless John Marshall, is re-examined, and draws quite a different picture of the father. The relationships between fathers and sons and those between brothers in the twelfth century might seem alien to modern minds, but made perfect sense to those people living it. Familial duty took precedence over love, and with young William sent off to a distant relative in Tancarville as an adolescent to learn his future vocation, contact with his own immediate family became sporadic at best.

Although there was little information to draw on, the bits of young William's life in the Tancarville household seem charmingly real; his nickname was "Scoff-food" (*gaste-viande*), and when he wasn't eating like a horse, he was sound asleep, much like any modern teenage boy today. His early life seemed unexceptional, the usual lot for a boy learning to become a knight, riding, hawking, learning the craft of warfare and tourney, everything except reading and writing, until his knighthood in 1167 in a matter-of-fact ceremony during a campaign in Normandy. Then he left the Tancarvilles to find his uncle, Earl Patrick of Salisbury, and secure a place in his *mesnie*.

William might have remained just another obscure, landless knight, doomed never to marry and live off his relatives for the

rest of his life, a common fate for younger sons of minor nobility, if it hadn't been for extraordinary circumstances. He didn't spend much time with his patron, Earl Patrick, as the latter was killed during an ambush by the Lusignan brothers while William and Patrick were escorting Queen Eleanor through Poitou. William was captured and ransomed to the queen, retained in her household and entered the golden world of royalty. Two years later, he entered into her son's *mesnie*, the Young King Henry, and that of the old King Henry in 1186 after a two year journey to Jerusalem to carry out a promise made to the dying Young King.

For the next three years, until Henry's death in 1189, William's role became more serious, staying afloat on the stormy tides of Angevin family politics. His reputation for loyalty and King Richard's for chivalrous conduct advanced his fortunes even in the face of what might have seemed certain disaster. Having been a bachelor knight until the age of 43, he was then married to the heiress Isabel of Striguil, a girl of barely 20 years old, if that. Before the year was out, his bride was pregnant with the first of ten children.

"So, in 1189, William Marshall became a magnate, but by no means as great a magnate as Sidney Painter believed. He was ruler of one of the flatter, and therefore richer, Marcher lordships (...) but in England he held precious little other than the potential to make money that the services of sixty-five and a half knight's fees gave him. The fat demesne manors of Weston in Hertfordshire and Parndon and Chesterford in Essex [remained] in the hands of his mother-in-law, Eve 'the Irish countess' widow of Earl Richard (Strongbow) and daughter of Dermot, king of Leinster". (pp. 63-4)

Everything William earned over the next nineteen years he had to work quite hard for. Even his actions after the death of his eldest brother John throws a light on the workings of the marshal's mind:

"No king could have cavilled at a day or two's delay in appearing if a courtier had to bury his brother, but William Marshall had chosen not to delay... John Marshall was not such a brother to him that his death could have distracted William too

long from his natural habitat, but there are degrees of grief... Not enough to keep William from the man who wore the crown, the true object of his affection, the man who could give him what his family had not". (p.74)

After Richard's death, William's fortunes remained high in the royal favor of King John, at least until 1204, when the Marshall's relationship with the king became strained, and not always due to John's capriciousness but often William's own miscalculation and arrogance. Things got bad enough for William "to want to be anywhere else but on the same island as the king. Leinster was a convenient place to go... he might go there, knock heads together and feel better." (pp. 92-3) This interlude may have been a turning point in William's life. "It (the Irish problem of rebellion) tested his capacity as no other episode of his life was to do. He had to fend off the king with one hand and preserve his lordship in Leinster with the other. He himself realized the nature of the crisis he had weathered, for after 1208 he single-mindedly devoted himself to the reconstruction and pacification of Leinster. Here we find the first signs that the man had some streak of greatness in him; that he was more than a simpering courtier. In the Leinster years we discover why the Marshal came in the end to rule England." (pp. 93-4) Crouch's account of the struggle between William and King John until the king's death in 1215 is exact, detailed, and too complex to summarize here.

William Marshall was sixty-eight when he became Regent for the nine-year-old Henry III. Older and greyer, he was still active in military campaigns, his last battle two years later against the French at the city of Lincoln where, amazingly for a man of his age, he "had the satisfaction during the battle of seeing off with several smart strokes Robert of Roppesley... (and) had the strength to take scatheless several blows on his helm, which were strong enough to dent it." (p.123) His four year Regency stabilized the kingdom while profiting himself and his own relatives handsomely.

His celebrated vigor took a very sudden turn in early 1219, when after a bout of severe intestinal pain his health rapidly deteriorated. "(His) pain continued and his appetite was quite gone. To the untutored historian, the description of his sounds

like a wasting form of bowel disease, perhaps a cancer, since it was not associated with any flux. The reader may treat the observation for what it is worth". He died in May, conducting himself on his deathbed with equal grace and correctness as he had in life.

All this in the first 132 pages would have been satisfying enough. Crouch then follows this chronological version of the Marshall's life with four more chapters, "The Marshall's Men", "Love and Lordship", "The Chivalry of the Marshall" and "*La Bone Fin va Tout*".

"One particular side of William Marshal's career as never had the attention that it deserves: his relations with the men who looked to him as lord." The marshal didn't become the man and leader he was all by himself. One of these was his ward and friend, John of Earley, later married to a woman who was quite likely the daughter of William's brother, John. Crouch identifies eighteen men who became associated with the Marshal, and examines their roles and relationship to William in great detail, giving a fascinating portrayal of the balances of power which was the lifeblood of the Marshal's age.

Nor are just his knights identified. "The *Histoire* tells us little about the Marshal's non-military followers: the minor estate officers, the lesser household members and, with but one exception, the clerks who surrounded the Marshal." (pp. 134-5) But Crouch is a thorough and patient researcher. "We are not short of evidence... Methodical as he was, Sydney Painter stopped short of the work necessary to balance and complement what the *Histoire* says. This would have involved tracking down and analysing the surviving originals and copies of the Marshal's writs and charters. True, this is a tedious task, but it is not unrewarding. I have found sixty-seven of them, with several charters more that were drawn up in the earl's presence." (p. 134) The wealth of information Crouch has uncovered has added immensely to understanding not only William Marshal's life, but the society in which he lived and even helped to create.

In "Love and Lordship", Crouch not only examines what may be to us the strange society where a man's most passionate love and devotion was reserved for other men. John of Earley dedication

to his lord lasted his entire life, serving his lord even after death, not just as his executor, but one of the promoters of the *Histoire*, supplying the author with both memories and money. Those within the earl's inner circle quite often become attached to his family, such as John of Earley, and Baldwin de Bethune whose daughter married William's eldest son. These affinities were vital; those who were not of this inner circle were quite often treated harshly, even hypocritically, by the Marshal, while those that were often forgiven treachery and betrayal. "We can only guess... important were his relations with his family and his intimate followers. But to me they were all important. Courtly tranquillity and composure must have taken its toll of his peace of mind as much as the unrelenting pursuit of his own advantage. Family and friends must have seemed the one stable, warm part of his life." (p. 157)

His relationships with women are less apparent. He respected his wife, if not for her person then for the assets he held in her name, and he visited his sisters when he could. He was deferential to noblewomen, and even chivalrous on occasion to ordinary women; he once had his squires assist an elderly woman trying to carry her mattress away from her burning house in Le Mans after his colleagues had set fire to the city in the first place. But his notions of chivalry only went so far; he once confiscated all the money from an eloping couple he'd stopped on the road, a noble sister of a castellan and a runaway monk, leaving them penniless and despairing. By rights, he should have delivered the pair to the local archdeacon for punishment. His greed, hypocrisy and cruelty do not conform with the image of the Marshall as Sydney Painter's "Flower of Chivalry".

"To the author of the *Histoire*... women are (like the Marshal's own mother) assets and objects of material promotion... Not one comes through as a developed character in her own right... It paints a man's world, a world of violence, comradeship and high politics... Few women had any business in the real world of the Marshal's *mesnie*, and they were a positive menace to its emotional life... Romantic knight-errant the Marshal was not." (pp. 172-3)

If his morality and chivalry were tempered in life by occasional selfish motives, his death was a model of propriety. After a

brave battle with his illness, he died in his son's arms, hallucinating that angels in white stood by his deathbed. John of Earley stood with him to the end with two abbots holding a cross before the dying man's face and signing his absolution. He had taken the white cloak of a Templar, and directed his body be wrapped in the shroud he'd brought back all those years before from Jerusalem. "William Marshal had lived well and died as he should. The good end counted for all." (p.194)