

Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *The Male Body and Social Masculinity in Premodern Europe*, Toronto (Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies) 2022, 297 p., 47 fig. (Essays and Studies, 56), ISBN 978-0-7727-1114-4, CAD 39,95.

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This set of fascinating essays explores connections between the premodern body and socially contingent ideas about masculinity. Scholars working in this field will know Thomas Laqueur's argument that the relationship between the physical body and gender categories was unstable until at least the end of the 17th century, but the contributors to »The Male Body and Social Masculinity« remind us that we should not allow the comparative instability of the premodern body to obscure its role in the social construction of masculinity. As the essays in this collection show, the premodern body was available ground onto which ideas about masculinity were laid, like layers of paint on a wood panel or stretched canvas.

This volume has emerged from a conference, co-organised by Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler and hosted by the Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium (Toronto, 2020). The ten essays in this collection span a historical period that is a little wider: two of the essays in the collection discuss earlier periods, the 1st century and the 12th to 13th centuries. Rather than fragment the collection, the decision to include the earlier studies demonstrates the value of looking across period boundaries. H. Peter Johnsson's well-wrought study of hair in Merovingian Gaul contrasts the meaning of long hairstyles and beard hair for secular rulers, religious leaders and laymen; Alison More considers the importance of short hair styles and beard hair in her absorbing discussion of ideas about versions of Christian masculinity based on bodily practices that sought to transcend physicality. The decision to include both essays has enriched the collection as a whole.

Murray's considerable experience as an editor is evident throughout this volume. Murray has emphasized the overarching focus on the physical body by dividing the ten essays into two sections: »Imperfect Bodies« and »Perfect Bodies«. The section »Imperfect Bodies« contains the two chapters on hair, two chapters that explore ideologies of sexual potency, and a chapter on the social and cultural status of the celebrity castrated male body. The section »Perfect Bodies« brings together two chapters on the value to elite masculinity of self-identifying as virginal, and three chapters that are concerned with the representation of desirable male bodies in art.



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The titles of the two sections, »Imperfect Bodies« and »Perfect Bodies«, provide a fairly loose framework for the volume as a whole, but one that stresses the importance of idealised physical standards for socially determined ideas about masculinity. The collection could equally have been organised into two sections on the basis that the chapters approach the physicality of the body in two main ways: physical appearance and sexual activity. The chapters on physical appearance include the two essays on hair and Sara K. Berkowitz's thoughtful discussion of the inability of 17th and 18th-century representations of celebrity *castrati* to fully depict the effect of castration on the physical body. Tatiana C. String also explores physical appearance in her study of the stock male body in Renaissance portraiture. As String argues convincingly, scholars may gravitate to »exceptional« physical appearance but we have as much to learn from studying physical conformity. Fabien Lacouture extends the discussion of physical appearance with his careful study of the representation of Saint John the Baptist's physical appearance in Renaissance art.

Maya Corry's well-researched study of the representation of youthful male beauty is as much about physical appearance as it is about sexuality; Corry argues that such images are products of a culture which allowed homosocial and homosexual activity to be compatible with male authority. The chapter on changing attitudes to impotence by Yvonne Petry and Kiegan Lloyd, and the chapter on legal strategies used to circumnavigate the absence of direct male heirs by Elena Brizio, skillfully exemplify the diversity of topics that bring into focus the social importance of the sexual function of the male body. Two further chapters also show how scholars of masculinity might develop wider approaches to the sexual body. Ivana Elbl and Timothy McCall present detailed case-studies of the deliberate manipulation of narratives of virginity by elite men to secure and enhance their status and authority.

Taken as a whole, the strength of this collection lies in its diversity, but to draw the collection together, the essays collectively explore socially determined constructions of masculinity which are underpinned by idealised notions of bodiliness, whether the aesthetic ideals involved in hair cutting, youthful beauty or degrees of musculature, or the sexual ideals of potency, fecundity, and heterosexual conformity. Some of the essays could be more secure in their arguments, framing or structure, but the collection as a whole is rewarding for the reader. In addition, it is fitting that a study of the physical body should also be a materially pleasing object, and not least because it includes such a generous number of coloured plates.



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