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Review of Shifra Armon, Masculine Virtue in Early Modern Spain

Edward Behrend-Martinez
Appalachian State University, behrend@fake.com

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Armon, Shifra. *Masculine Virtue in Early Modern Spain*. Burlington, Vermont: Routledge, 2016. Xii + 144 pp.

Masculine Virtue in Early Modern Spain by Shifra Armon uses an array of Golden Age literature and art to reveal several character traits that early modern Spanish noblemen began idealizing in their quest for advancement in Madrid and at court: fame, dissimulation, and adaptability. According to the author, *Masculine Virtue's* main purpose is “to forge a genealogy of masculine conduct as figured forth in secular print culture during the period from 1500-1700.” (9) Armon later provides what proves to be a truer iteration of the book’s goal “to ascertain the ongoing descriptive usefulness that [Norbert] Elias’s social thought holds for Spain.” (19) The civilizing process in Spain is much more the focus of this study. Armon promises to use masculinity and gender as the book’s theoretical lenses. And to do so she begins by covering definitions of masculinity by obligatory theorists like Judith Butler and Joan Scott, convincing us that masculinity is gender performance, etc. But after chapter two masculinity rarely comes up.

In the second chapter, “Masculinity, Conduct, and Empire” Armon discusses conduct literature for Spaniards at the end of the sixteenth century. Most of Armon’s arguments revolve around the growth of Madrid as a power center of Spain’s new empire, and preference at the Spanish court as the new goal of an ambitious generation of noblemen and *letrados*. Such preferment could only be obtained through developing aspects of a “civilized” comportment. Importantly, Armon rejects the argument that Spain experienced a “crisis of masculinity” as its empire encountered problems in the seventeenth century. Armon concludes this and each chapter with a discussion of the ramifications of the chapter topic – fame, dissimulation, and adaptability – and its relation to Elias’s vision of the “civilizing” process.

Throughout the book Armon examines a wide variety of primary sources to make her cases about idealized manners of comportment, everything from *El Cid* to Castiglione’s *The Courtier* to *Don Quixote* to Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* and many more. In discussing the rise of fame as the topic of chapter three as an early modern goal of noblemen, she begins discussing medieval Spanish notions of fame and continues up through *Don Quixote* in the seventeenth century. This approach makes for interesting reading as it references so many familiar texts, but has us understand them through the examination of the quest for fame. What Armon does not do explicitly is connect the reputedly new quest for fame with masculinity. Perhaps we are to assume that whatever kind of behavior contemporary Spanish men idealized was therefore part of their performance of masculinity. Were there references to fame as pointedly manly or unmanly, as part of *hombria* or *ser hombre*?

Armon’s discussion of the fascinating topic of dissimulation in chapter four is important. Dissimulation appeared repeatedly in all kinds of contexts during the sixteenth century as a strategy and/or problem for early modern Spaniards. Machiavelli, of course, praised the fox’s use of dissimulation and the author of *Lazarillo de Tormes* lampooned dissimulation. So Armon’s exploration of it through various Golden Age texts is exciting. Early modern masculinity was susceptible to being understood as a kind of dissimulation (see Catalina/Miguel de Erauso’s

performance of it at court, for instance). Again, however, there is no explicit discussion of the impact dissimulation had on the contemporary construction of manliness.

Armon's investigation focuses primarily on didactic literature, manuals for courtiers, and some artists, mainly Diego Velazquez, and her use of theory draws mainly from cultural theorists. There is a great deal of work by historians of men, masculinity, and gender that the book ignores, important works by Allyson Poska, Mary Elizabeth Perry, Cristian Berco, Scott Taylor, Erin Rowe, to name a few. In the field of masculine social theory scholars like R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, and outside Spain historians Ruth Mazo Karras and Valeria Finucci are also overlooked.

Masculine Virtue in Early Modern Spain makes several important arguments, even though Armon falls short of producing a "genealogy of masculinity." Armon shows how the growth of Spanish state power affected ideals of comportment, at least if we are to believe the manuals produced to advise men in high circles. Armon importantly opens up a debate about the applicability of Elias's views of the civilizing process in the Spanish context, an issue and approach that few scholars studying the period have dealt with directly. Elias's theory has been tested and debated in the context of many European states and societies, but he has not been discussed much within the Spanish context, which is all the more surprising considering Spain's early development as an empire and state. As for gender, rather than illuminating masculine construction broadly, the book is primarily focused on masculinity at court and among the elite noblemen and the literature they might have read. So this book succeeds as a stimulating study in comportment and changes in Spanish cultural values due to the rise of the Spanish state, but readers looking for an in-depth discussion of masculinity will find it wanting.

Edward Behrend-Martínez
Appalachian State University