

“MANLINESS UNMASKED”

A Review Essay

Bowman, James. *Honor: A History*. New York: Encounter Books, 2006. 381 pp. \$25.95 hardcover.

Mansfield, Harvey. *Manliness*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006. 302 pp. \$17.00 softcover.

Manliness is a hot topic these days. Educators have begun to fret about a growing gender gap in young men's academic performance, while intellectual watchdogs like Christina Hoff Sommers have been chronicling an ongoing *War Against Boys*. In Catholic circles, men's groups have come into vogue, while a new generation of seminarians is eager to rebuild an “authentic male spirituality.”¹ Yet such developments are as much a sign of crisis as of vitality. Could the resurgence of interest in maleness and the things associated with it (such as honor) be another sad example of the Owl of Minerva flying at dusk?

Bowman's *Honor*

According to two recent authors, the answer totters ominously towards the affirmative. James Bowman's *Honor: A History* is not an exhaustive survey (hence the subtitle's indefinite article), but it ably demonstrates the principal contours of honor and why it is important.

Bowman's approach is more descriptive than definitive, which explains why he refutes, with a series of juxtapositions, the common belief that honor and morality are identical. While morality is borderless, honor is local, tied to a well-defined ancestral group. While morality is gender-blind, demanding both sexes to be equally chaste, honor has substantially different expectations for each sex, so much so that the greatest reproach for one sex is greeted with indifference by the other.² While morality is egalitarian, honor is aristocratic, proud of and reliant on its exclusivity. And while morality places a premium on truth, honor readily subordinates it to glory or victory—hence honor-related activities, such as sports, generally reward deceptions like curve balls and fake passes.

Recognizing honor as a basic human need, Bowman views with alarm its virtual disappearance from the West and offers different reasons why we should too. Most immediately, fathoming honor is essential to understanding the non-Western world, which still uses honor

as its central cultural currency. Bowman gives, as a fascinating case study, the Bush administration's snafu about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which happened, he contends, because Washington and its allies misread Saddam Hussein's refusal to deny that he had such weapons as an admission that he did. To the Western mind, not "coming clean" under these conditions simply made no sense. Yet as Bowman argues, the U.S. was not dealing with a Western mind. American officials overlooked Arab honor culture and its so-called "tyranny of the face" and thus failed to see how Saddam was virtually compelled to lie for the sake of domestic and regional standing (28). Bowman, a resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, is equally insightful in surveying other Middle Eastern customs we find unintelligible or repugnant, such as tribunal-ordered gang rapes and "honor killings," and he aptly exposes the bankruptcy of Western attempts to trace these practices to poverty, ignorance, or religion (as it turns out, Islam did not invent Arab honor culture but inherited it).

How did honor come into such disregard? For Bowman, the West was once as honor-bound as anywhere else, though Westerners have always been distinctive for harboring a note of skepticism about it. Even before offering their philosophical critique of honor (which, as we will see, Bowman would have been wise to spend more time exploring), the Greeks placed an unusual emphasis on *individual* honor, linking it to the idea of virtue. Christianity, with its universality and sympathy for pacifism, heightened classical philosophy's skeptical regard. But, prompted by the "martial necessities of a chaotic and dangerous world," the Christian faith also helped change honor, forcing medieval knights to recognize the full humanity of women and even the "ascetic standard of virginity" (49-50). Honor-skepticism then came into its own with the Renaissance, causing a stalemate that lasted until the Victorian period, the great achievement of which, according to Bowman, was the reconciliation of morality, democracy, and honor.

But this coalition was too fragile to withstand the horrors of the First World War and the subsequent "myth of senselessness" which considers war to be the worst of all possible evils and anyone who believes otherwise a fool or a scoundrel. Ironically, an anti-honor culture emerged as the only honorable alternative, and not even the Second World War (*pace* the "lofty cant" of Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation" (172)) could restore honor to the public square. Indeed, both sides of World War II were enemies of traditional honor: fascists came to power on a cult-of-youth platform holding slavishly honorable old men responsible for the Great War, while the Allies portrayed Nazism and Japanese militarism as the inevitable consequence of a duty-

bound honor culture. American GI's were almost boastful that they were not fighting within the strictures of honor: Their paragon was the soldier who "didn't take crap from anybody" (be he the enemy or his own superior officer) and who "just wanted to go home" when it was all over.

The real blow to honor in American society, however, came with the Vietnam War. Bowman excels in showing how all of the elements of the post-World War I anti-honor culture were recapitulated during the Vietnam years. To take one of many examples: During both the 1920s and 1960s, the discrediting of male honor (bravery) led to a discrediting of female honor (chastity), thus giving rise to the Jazz Age and the Sexual Revolution, respectively. Just as Europe never recovered socially from World War I, America has yet to recover from Vietnam; indeed, the anti-honor counterculture of the time gradually became, for all intents and purposes, the official culture we have today.³

Given this situation, whither shall we go? Since he does not think that the West can defend its distinctive values without a revived form of honor,⁴ Bowman calls for a new reconciliation of honor and liberalism comparable to that of the Victorian era (albeit with concessions to feminism). Though he is pessimistic about his advice ever being taken, Bowman identifies four things, in ascending order of difficulty, that would need to happen: the revival of a warrior spirit cognizant of worse things than war; the reacceptance of the idea of rank; the dethroning of celebrity status and the proud return, among men of merit, of "being out of touch" with pop culture; and the restoration of the respectability of feminine qualities such as nurturing and motherhood (306ff).

Every page of *Honor* is fascinating, thought-provoking, and well-researched. Bowman is a fine writer who knows how to keep his reader hooked, beginning each of his chapters with an analysis of a popular movie or book, usually as a lens more into the era in which it was made than the period which it ostensibly covers. (*Gone With the Wind*, for instance, tells us more about the attitudes of the post-World War I "lost generation" than of the antebellum South.) While a lesser author would have succumbed to a curmudgeonly tone, Bowman lets his own fascination for the strange phenomenon of honor inform his prose and guide his arguments.

Though Bowman is no blind apologist for honor (he is aware that it often involves hypocrisy, lets leaders get away with injustices, and indulges misty nostalgia), he fails to plumb the depths of honor's dark side. Had Bowman traced honor to what Plato calls spiritedness or *thumos*, he would have been able to substantiate his claim that honor is a human need, while also acknowledging the bloody role that honor-

seeking plays in history's greatest crimes. Honor, Plato knew well, is a dangerous thing without wisdom's tutelage, for on its own it cannot know what cause or idea is worth defending. Bowman is right to contrast honor with morality, but this is precisely the problem, and until the implications of this are addressed frankly, reviving honor could cause more problems than it solves.

Honor's other weakness is the insufficient attention it pays to Christianity. If Christianity is the deciding difference between Western and non-Western ideas of honor, it should occupy a more central place in the argument. Yet Bowman, subscribing to a fairly modern understanding of Christianity as individualistic and egalitarian, treats the religion as either antithetical or orthogonal to honor. He does not cite any of the one-hundred-plus biblical passages that mention honor,⁵ nor does he engage any relevant theological discussions. This lacuna also affects his final diagnosis. Bowman admits that honor often is, as our intelligentsia aver, a mask for power, but he maintains that it is an important mask nonetheless (289; cf. 321). Fair enough, but rarely do men live and die for something they know to be a lie, no matter how noble it is. And if Bowman's book proves anything, it is that virtually every member of the Western elite "knows" that honor is a lie.

Honor's restoration would therefore seem to require the impossible task of being yoked to something true. But how? In the spirit of Bowman's engaging style, the answer may lie in a film. Like *Gone With the Wind*, the 1964 *Becket* tells us more about the decade that produced it than the life of its eponymous medieval martyr. The movie features the Saxon social-climber, Thomas à Becket, espousing quintessentially postmodern views to justify collaboration with his Norman oppressor, King Henry II. "Honour is a concern of the living," he tells Henry. "One can't very well be concerned about it once one's dead." Yet after his elevation to the archbishopric of Canterbury, Becket falls in love with "the honour of God" (the subtitle of Jean Anouilh's original play), and even though he continues to recognize the absurdity of his situation, he courageously returns from exile to accept martyrdom in its defense.

Conversion to God, in other words, may yet furnish jaded men and women with an honor that satisfies their need for something higher and overcomes their hostility to being deceived. And for those who remain unconverted (which at any given time is bound to be a sizeable portion of the populace), there is always the example of the King who, taking advantage of Becket's death, reconciles with his Saxon subjects and promotes Becket's canonization. "The honour of God, gentlemen," he tells the astonished barons who murdered the archbishop, "is a very

good thing. And all things considered, one gains by having it on one's side." God's honor, it would appear, can be used as a "mask" for the City of Man (albeit a mask that literally chastises excessive ambition)⁶ at the same time that it is a ladder for the City of God, elevating its members beyond the hypocritical veneer of political life. Granted, Western civilization's public return to God is probably even more unlikely than Bowman's four proposed cures, but it would have the singular merit of possessing the only viable ground for those cures.

Mansfield's *Manliness*

Harvey Mansfield's *Manliness* is a fitting companion to Bowman's work: not only was Mansfield a reader of one of *Honor's* earlier drafts, but his own philosophical thought remedies Bowman's omitted links to *thumos*.⁷ Mansfield's goal is to convince "skeptical readers, above all educated women ... that irrational manliness deserves to be endorsed by reason" (ix). To do this Mansfield covers much ground, taking an oscillating, Socratic approach to his Achillean subject. Mansfield's initial characterization of manliness as confidence in times of risk eventually yields to an understanding of manliness as assertiveness: evolutionary biology and social psychology's fixation on "male aggression" points in the right direction but does not go far enough, or rather, high enough.

Mansfield is also interested in what happens to manliness in our current "gender-neutral society," where sex "does not determine your rights, your duties, or your place" (ix); and he is more aware than most how thin the line is between prescinding from another's sex and denying your own. With this interest in the strengths and weaknesses of the gender-neutral society comes a fascinating genealogy of how it ever came into being. Did you know, for example, that Hobbes is the creator of the Sensitive Male? Equally impressive is Mansfield's treatment of postwar feminism, which, he argues, is not liberal (in the Lockean sense) but illiberal, a byproduct of Nietzschean nihilism. This foundation would account for modern feminism's ambivalence, promoting women's independence while having nothing essential to say about womanhood (240).

Like Bowman, Mansfield is a fine writer who frequently incorporates well-known books, movies, and figures into his discussions, as well as the latest statistics and studies on the differences between the sexes. But part of Mansfield's project is to recover the wisdom of common sense: He even offers a qualified defense of stereotypes by exposing the roots of this recent and now ubiquitous

category. *Manliness* is also painfully funny. Mansfield's erudite argument on the inadequacies of social science for understanding manliness, for example, is punctuated by the following footnote:

Oh social scientist! You long for a study that will say how many Grace Kellys and how many Gary Coopers will rise to the occasion, how many will cringe in helpless fright. If only there were a study, we wouldn't have to go to the movies (252).

Mansfield does not see manliness as the exclusive domain of one sex (Margaret Thatcher is his favorite example), nor does he view his subject as unconditionally good (both the heroes and the villains on September 11, he reminds us, were manly). Rather, if manliness is a kind of assertiveness, it should be yoked to something rational, so that its assertions are in some way reasonable. Mansfield's explications here of *thumos* are particularly valuable.

Manliness, then, is not the only subject that Mansfield is attempting to communicate to his audience. To achieve his objective Mansfield must also recover the only [natural] science capable of understanding *res humana* in all their complexity: political philosophy (cf. xiii). Indeed, so salient is this current that I was surprised the subtitle to *Manliness* was not *Political Philosophy for Dummies*. The preface provides a fairly explicit blueprint for how to read between the lines of his work, while his discussions of John Wayne and Ernest Hemingway are frequently interrupted by penetrating critiques of Darwinism and social science (it helps to appreciate political philosophy as an architectonic wisdom when the inadequacies of its contemporary competitors are made plain). Mansfield's examination of manliness almost seems to be not an end unto itself but an instance of political philosophy manfully asserting itself as the discipline most fit to rule the others. It was near the end of the book, after reading Mansfield's philosophical unmasking of Simone de Beauvoir (whom he deliciously dubs "Nietzsche in drag") that I realized why Mansfield did not add the subtitle that had come to my mind. By definition, political philosophy *can't* be for dummies, regardless of the otherwise shy Harvard professor's appearances on cable TV's *The Colbert Report* and in Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine*.

As a practical science, political philosophy has something to say about how to live. Mansfield's concluding chapter, "Unemployed Manliness," makes a vigorous case for finding suitable employment for manliness within the confines of liberalism, despite the fact that liberalism typically produces such unmanly types as the professional, the technician, and the health nut (232). Mansfield rather summarily

discounts a return to traditional sex roles (with women as housewives)⁸ in order to endorse a return to the liberalism of J.S. Mill. Our public laws, the author argues, should be those of a gender-neutral society with equal rights for all, while our private mores should respect and foster the complementary differences between men and women. Mansfield thus envisions a society in which the public sphere protects women's rights while the private cultivates an atmosphere in which both sexes, regardless of their marital status, live "as if they were married," that is, with "the men protective and authoritative as if they were husbands, the women nurturing and critical as if they were wives" (242).

Mansfield's suggestion (too unmanly a word?) rests on a distinction between the liberal gender-neutral state, which guarantees formal equality, and the illiberal gender-neutral society, which "gives no respect to the liberal distinction between state and society or between public and private" (244). But given the effect of politics properly understood on all facets of human life, one is led to wonder how sturdy a distinction this is. What is to stop the principles of a gender-neutral state (a reasonable regime to be sure) from seeping into other spheres and creating a gender-neutral society? Not only does Mansfield refrain from explaining how the right balance between public and private can be restored, he does not tell us what could prevent the imbalance from happening all over again. Tocqueville in his day could point to subsidiary institutions that militated against the encroachments of the state, but what mediating private forces are there today to promote a natural appreciation of the sexes, especially when most churches and synagogues in the U.S. (key institutions for Tocqueville) are essentially liberal or egalitarian in their views? A close reading of Mansfield's recommendation would hint that he has either not thought the matter through (unlikely, given his command of Tocqueville), or that he is more pessimistic about the feasibility of his plan than he lets on.

Tocqueville's praise of Christianity in saving democracy from itself (a goal Mansfield has as well) also highlights the same lacuna in *Manliness* that is to be found in *Honor*. Like Bowman, Mansfield does not stray beyond the exclusively rational. Though he does remark that the wisdom of which he speaks can be found in the Bible as well as political philosophy (231), Mansfield has in mind the same two kinds of manliness as Plato: Achilles or Socrates, but not Jesus Christ (39). This is not unreasonable, for a political philosophy judging the merits of divine revelation would be arrogant. Still, can it not at least evaluate the paragons of manliness that revelation presents? Surely a man's claiming to be God qualifies as assertiveness, while his setting his face like flint toward Jerusalem and going to his death for the sake of others is a story that merits as much consideration as *High Noon* (a recurring topic), especially when that story has proved to be a bit more influential.

Conclusion

That said, the gaps that I have underscored in *Manliness* and *Honor* should not be a deterrent for further use of these books but a double incentive.

First—and more negatively—Mansfield and Bowman’s works are an unwitting rebuke to much revisionist Catholic social thinking, a representation of the kind of daring inquiry into sex and civilization that should be taking place theologically but is not. Contemporary Catholic revisionist theology often finds itself recycling 1970s Anglo-American feminism in its demands for women priests and altar girls or groping for some sort of “new” feminism. While the former still holds sway in most theology departments, it appears to have run its course intellectually, leading more and more scholars to explore the possibility of the latter. A case in point is the well-edited volume *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*,⁹ which endeavors to circumvent “traditional” anthropology on the one hand and second-wave feminism on the other. Yet some of the contributors’ tendencies to rely on egalitarian ideology and the oddly impersonal abstractions of personalism, combined with their aversion to “eternal essences,” threaten to propel their project back onto the path of Nietzsche and into the arms of Beauvoir. Books such as Peter E. Chojnowski’s 2005 *Flesh of My Flesh*¹⁰ offer a striking—if not reactionary—alternative to these forms of feminism, but such traditionalist dissent is rare and generally neglects to confront modern thought on its own terms. (In the case of *Flesh of My Flesh*, its archaic punctuation and Germanic propensity for capitalized nouns even fail to come to terms with modern grammatical usage.) Seen against this backdrop, *Manliness* and *Honor* exemplify the kind of stimulating conversation Christian thinkers could be having instead.

Second—and more positively—*Manliness* and *Honor* serve as excellent starting points for further theological reflection, while their dearth of conclusions about the supernatural leaves less of a mess for theologians to untangle. This is not to say that their conclusions should be accepted without question, but that even when they fall short of their goals, they do so in a way that highlights the kinds of questions that theologians as well as philosophers should be raising and the manner in which they should be raised. Indeed, without in any way wishing to detract from the honor or manliness of either author, Bowman and Mansfield’s theses would make lovely handmaidens for a reinigorated theology of man.

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Notes

1. Todd M. Aglialoro, "The New Catholic Manliness," *Crisis Magazine* 25:6 (July/August 2007), 8-14.
2. Even today, calling a man a "wimp" and a woman a "slut" is an act of provocation, but reversing the insults is not—for some it is even a compliment (5-6).
3. And with this loss of honor have come a number of consequences, including: the worship of celebrities instead of genuine heroes; the apotheosis of feeling and "authenticity"; and the self-esteem movement which, in excluding any notion of shame, robs honor of one of its most potent weapons.
4. There is, however, a contradiction in Bowman's call for a return to honor as a matter of necessity, since the honorable man disdains arguments from mere self-preservation as venal or plebeian.
5. That figure can exceed two hundred, depending on the translation.
6. The movie opens with Henry being flogged by monks in atonement for the murder.
7. I am almost tempted to say that Mansfield plays the Plato to Bowman's Thucydides.
8. Mansfield dismisses a woman's return to the home as nostalgic and reactionary. He does not acknowledge the growing number of women who have consciously done so in recent years, nor does he take into consideration the benefits of a "traditional" household on children—an odd omission given the emphasis that his mentors Plato and Aristotle place on the education of the young.
9. Michele M. Schumacher, ed., *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004).
10. Peter E. Chojnowski, *Flesh of My Flesh: The Contemporary Assault on Men and Women*, ed. Claudia Hojnowski (Post Falls, Idaho: Pelican Project, 2005).