The Culture of Manhood

Judith Sargent Murray once instructed her readers, “Let every American play the man for his country.” The phrase was a common one. Writers and speakers employed it to motivate young males to quit their disorderly ways, measure up to standards of manhood, and fulfill their duties as citizens. What did “play the man” mean? How did manhood relate to politics? In the last half of the eighteenth century, the American culture of manhood was a complex discursive arena composed of contested ideals and consensual norms that the American founders molded into a relatively coherent “grammar of manhood” that defined citizenship and legitimized leadership in the new republic.

The Traditional Patriarch

Early America’s dominant ideal of manhood was the traditional patriarch who devoted himself to governing his family and serving his community. E. Anthony Rotundo describes the traditional patriarch as “a towering figure . . . the family’s unquestioned ruler.” He exhibited exemplary self-control and little visible emotion. He might express “approval or disapproval in place of affection or anger” and govern family dependents through “persuasion and sympathy,” but he also could issue edicts and enforce his will with coercive power and corporal punishment. The traditional patriarch governed his “little commonwealth” by supervising his wife’s piety and productivity, and by managing his sons’ education and children’s marriages to perpetuate his family line. Though his authority was nearly absolute, a family father was accountable to church officials and civic leaders, who sought to ensure the “good order in the home” they thought essential to social harmony and the public good.

American culture encouraged young males to discipline desire, marry early, sire legitimate offspring, and mature into traditional patriarchs. Protestant clergy counseled youth on marital duty as an alternative to sexual promiscu-
ity or priestly chastity. During the Great Awakening, Susan Juster reports, Congregational ministers worried that New Light spiritual individualism, disregard for authority, and emotionalism fostered “a kind of sexual anarchy,” “a potential for sexual libertinism,” and “a sexualized climate” subversive of family stability and public order. The proper way to transform male lust into virtue was to channel it into monogamous marriage and sublimate it into family responsibility. Secular wisdom also urged young men into marriage. A Virginian communicated common sense on the subject in 1779 by stating, “No man who has health, youth, and vigor on his side can when arrived to the age of manhood do without a woman.” In turn, marriage focused male passion on family duty. Nancy Cott observes, “Marriage was seen as a relationship in which the husband agreed to provide food, clothing, and shelter for his wife, and she agreed to return frugal management, and obedient service.” Fundamentally, “to ‘act like a man’ meant to support one’s wife.”

Not all young males could act like a man. Mary Noyes Silliman counseled her sons to “lay a foundation in subsistence” before contemplating marriage. That was especially difficult when fathers withheld the land and patrimony that sons needed to support a family, or when fathers had little or no realty to transmit to their sons. Still, few writers saw economic want as prohibitive. Benjamin Franklin argued that any poor, hardworking young man could acquire enough land to start a family. George Washington applauded the opening of the Ohio Valley as an opportunity for “the poor, the needy, and the oppressed” to own land and start families. Thomas Jefferson justified the Louisiana Purchase, in part, as enabling “everyone who will labor to marry young and to raise a family of any size.” The choice of marriage was a different matter for servants, apprentices, and slaves, who needed their masters’ permission to marry; but masters such as Thomas Jefferson approved of dependent marriages as a means to tame male passions and make male slaves more obedient and reliable.

The reputed “taming effect” of marriage threatened to subject young men to the manipulative powers of potentially domineering women. John Gregory’s popular advice book A Father’s Legacy to His Daughter admonished against women’s tendency to abuse their power “over the hearts of men,” and Pennsylvania Magazine sounded an alert against “bad wives [who] flatter and tyrannize over men of sense.” Alas, marriage exposed men to female tyranny. One counterresponse was to define manhood as tyranny over women. American fiction embodied figures such as Hannah Webster Foster’s Peter Sanford, a coxcomb who saw overcoming obstacles to the sexual conquest of an innocent girl as “the glory of a rake,” and Judith Sargent Murray’s Sinisterus Court-
land, a rogue who squandered his patrimony, fell into debt, and tried “to ex-
tricate himself by . . . deluding some woman whose expectations were tolera-
ble into an affair of the heart.” A fictive war of the sexes was waged by se-
ductive coquettes and deceitful libertines.

Mainstream culture condemned both the coquette and the libertine but con
donned the notion that men needed to restrain disorderly women. The pre-
dered means of restraint were parental education and marital supervision. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich writes that colonial parents sought to instill in their daughters virtues such as “prayerfulness, industry, charity, [and] modesty.” At an appropriate age, young women were to marry and submit to their hus-
bands’ authority. A well-bred wife did not tyrannize over her husband; nor did a manly husband fear “bondage” from his wife. Benjamin Franklin asserted that “every man that really is a man” would be “master of his own family.” If he married a “difficult girl,” he still was expected to “subdue even the most restless spirits” and transform an unruly spouse into a virtuous “helpmeet” who practiced piety, gave birth, nursed infants, educated children, cooked, healed, manufactured, managed servants, grew food, tended livestock, traded in the marketplace, worked in the family shop, took in boarders, or engaged in paid employment. The precise nature and degree of a husband’s authority varied by religion, race, ethnicity, class, and region, but the legitimacy of his family sovereignty was everywhere secured by law and custom.

A major motive for young men to marry was to procreate legitimate sons. John Demos explains that the traditional patriarch sired, raised, and educated sons to continue his “accomplishments, indeed his very character, into the fu-
ture.” The Reverend John Robinson noted that grandfathers often were “more affectionate towards their children’s children than to their immediates as see-
ing themselves further propagated in them, and by their means proceeding to a further degree of eternity, which all desire naturally, if not in themselves, yet in their posterity.” A concerned father made sacrifices to provision and pro-
tect sons and, in turn, expected to achieve a sense of immortality through his children. Contemporary testamentary practices indicated that northern men tried to extend family dynasties for one generation and southern men hoped to perpetuate them even longer. The conviction that fathers were deeply de-
voted to their posterity suggested that they had an enduring stake in the com-
munity that justified citizenship. Accordingly, New York artisans proposed in the 1760s that “every man who honestly supports a family by useful employ-
ment” should have the right to vote and hold office.

The traditional patriarch’s performance as husband and father was his main contribution to the community. Men with marital responsibilities disciplined
their passions; husbands who were masters of a household restrained women’s disorderly conduct; and responsible fathers produced sons likely to mature into trustworthy citizens. Also, the traditional patriarch represented his household in the various hierarchies that ordered the larger society. This meant, among other things, that he recognized, respected, and deferred to his superiors—the “fathers” and “tender parents” of his communal family.8

**Destabilizing Traditional Patriarchy**

The ideal of the traditional patriarch was destabilized between 1750 and 1800 when, Jay Fliegelman suggests, Americans began to surrender “an older patriarchal family authority” in favor of “more affectionate and equalitarian” family relationships.9 English Whig ideology and disputed gender relations, a gap between American patriarchal ideals and actual gender relations, and dynamic economic change contributed to a weakening of the traditional patriarch as the dominant ideal of manhood. The result was not the elimination of the old ideal but the emergence of several alternative ideals.

England transmitted to America a mixed image of manhood. On the one hand, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Englishmen legitimized the traditional patriarch and authorized him to rule family dependents with almost “absolute authority.” He managed a wife whose lot was “perpetual pregnancy” to multiply her husband’s person “by propagation.” He supervised his sons’ upbringing to ensure they would mature into responsible stewards of the family dynasty. The exemplary patriarch spoke with an upper-class accent, but his authority trickled down so that even “lower-class household rulers” were considered more manly and mature than “peers who were still in service and lacked families of their own.” English writers agreed that a “well-ordered family,” with an “orderly head” and “orderly members,” was “the basis of the entire social order.”10

On the other hand, the Whig attack on absolute kingship generated doubts about all absolute authority. Algernon Sidney, James Tyrrell, and John Locke vested familial authority in the traditional patriarch but they also sought to limit paternal power to prevent domestic tyranny. They experimented with the idea of marriage as a negotiable contract that could be terminated in divorce; they emphasized a husband’s duties toward his wife; and they declared adult sons to be fully free and equal men. Also, they allowed for occasional state intervention to prevent and punish patriarchal abuses and even contemplated instances when female sovereignty and filial rebellion were justified.11
Popular pamphleteers pushed further in this direction. Mary Astell compared tyrannical husbands to tyrannical kings and suggested that wives in families deserved the same rights that Whigs claimed for men in politics. Other writers complained of “foolish, passionate, stingy, sottish” husbands who thought themselves “free from all restraints.” They needed to be less authoritarian and more respectful and loving toward their wives. In the changing family, writes Lawrence Stone, “The authority of husbands over wives and of parents over children declined as greater autonomy was granted to or assumed by all members of the family unit. There were the beginnings of a trend toward greater legal and educational equality between the sexes. . . . Although the economic dependence of these women on their husbands increased, they were granted greater status and decision-making power within the family.”

This emerging companionate ideal suggested a new model of husband-wife relations, plus a new understanding of father-son relations.

The Whig notion that fathers and adult sons were equals weakened paternal authority. Fathers had only a few years to leave an imprint on sons before the latter became autonomous men. Unfortunately, that imprint was often one of neglect and abuse. James Harrington reported that “innumerable children come to owe their utter perdition” to fathers who ignored them and thereby exposed them to excessive maternal indulgence. John Locke was particularly appalled by fathers whose poor parenting skills “weaken and effeminate” their sons. He proposed a theory of psychological fatherhood to strengthen intergenerational bonds, so that a father could train a son to mature into a proper heir and an “affectionate friend when he is a man.” The traditional patriarch’s strict authority over his sons was gradually transformed into mere influence over them.

Gordon Schochet concludes that the Whig “rejection of absolute fatherly authority” was more symptomatic “of what was coming rather than . . . [of] what had already taken place.” What was coming finally arrived when Americans adapted Whig rhetoric to local conditions. In 1764, James Otis, Jr., resurrected a century-old line of questioning: “Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature?” A decade later, Thomas Paine denounced men who abused patriarchal authority to play the “tyrant” and keep women “in a state of dependence” akin to slavery. He urged men to give more recognition and respect to women. The next year, Abigail Adams called it indisputable that men had been “naturally tyrannical” to women. She wanted husbands to “give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend” and to treat wives not as “vassals” but as “under your protection.”
In America as in England, Whig rhetoric generated skepticism of vast authority.

Whig rhetoric also called attention to a gap between the ideal of the traditional patriarch and the everyday reality of gender relations. Kenneth Lockridge agrees that traditional patriarchs were expected to control “all things in their households.” However, even within a context of domination and subordination, women were historical agents with “substantial power.” They had leverage over men during courtship as well as in their roles as mothers, household managers, laborers, religious activists, and widows who controlled family estates and minor children. The extent of women’s agency grew during the Revolution, when women assumed de facto family sovereignty, ran farms and shops, participated in America’s political and military life, and thereby blurred the boundaries between the masculine and feminine. For many men, women’s enlarged influence made them appear to be especially dangerous, destructive, and disorderly creatures.15

The gap between the patriarchal ideal and family reality expanded as republican values seeped into domestic culture. Criticism of husbands’ arbitrary power and abusive treatment of wives was common in eighteenth-century America. In 1743, for example, a poet castigated “the tyrant husband” who imposed “fatal bondage” on his wife. In 1759, Annis Boudinot Stockton declared, “Oh men behave like men,” to insist that husbands stop degrading their wives and instead cherish their virtues. The Revolution’s attack on tyranny in favor of benevolence weakened traditional patriarchal authority and strengthened companionate norms in marriage. Judith Sargent Murray wrote that men “usurped an unmanly and unfounded superiority” over women when they ought to strive for “mutual esteem, mutual friendship, mutual confidence, begirt about by mutual forbearance.” A husband’s respect for his wife was “as tender as it is manly,” implying that it was not the stern patriarch but the loving husband who epitomized true manhood.16

The dominant ideal was also undermined by economic trends that impaired paternal power. The traditional patriarch monopolized control of land and command of his children’s destinies. However, population growth, economic expansion, and commercial development destroyed this monopoly. Even affluent fathers suffered a diminished capacity to transmit land to sons when their settlements became densely populated. In Dedham, Massachusetts, for example, intensified land use fostered family dispersion. As wealth became more unevenly distributed, poor fathers without land to distribute or bequeath discovered they had little economic clout. They could not “control
their sons by promising the gift of a farm later in life.” Finally, young men had options. Some settled western lands to achieve “what only total independence would recognize, the right to shape their own communities.” Others sought their fortunes in towns and cities where commerce opened up new opportunities for income. Many fathers became what scholars call “enlightened paternalists” or “friendly paternalists” who relied on Locke’s “subtle, psychological means” to maintain a grip on their posterity.17

The traditional patriarch’s authority was further eroded by an emerging separation of home and workplace. As men began to leave home to spend their days at separate workplaces, they gradually became part-time husbands and fathers who depended on their wives to manage their households and parent their children. Americans came to believe that men’s days in the marketplace “depleted” virtue whereas women and children’s time in the domestic sphere “renewed” it. With fathers and sons occupying different spatial and ethical worlds, fathers began to lose the capacity to guide their sons into manhood. Some critics questioned whether fathers tainted by social vices should educate their sons, and most agreed that mothers were increasingly responsible for promoting and protecting their sons’ virtue. Eventually, fathers’ parental authority was transferred to mothers.18

Some Americans reacted to the destabilization of the traditional ideal with what Lockridge labels “patriarchal rage.” A youthful Jefferson filled his commonplace book with quotations indicating a misogynist hatred for women allied to an ongoing fantasy “that men could reproduce without women.” Jefferson’s youthful rage matured into “the subtle and perverse misogyny of the new democratic age” manifested in the nascent doctrine of separate spheres which, Nancy Cott argues, was a means “to shore up manhood (by differentiating it from womanhood) at a time when the traditional concomitants and supports of manhood . . . were being undermined and transformed.” New England shoemakers put the doctrine into effect in the 1780s when they began to set up shops outside their homes, take male apprentices into their shops to teach them the entire production process, and recruit female relatives to perform limited functions from within their homes. Artisans reinforced their authority over production in “men’s sphere” and reaffirmed their prerogative to confine females, control their knowledge, and harness their labor in “women’s sphere.” Some women reacted to persistent patriarchy by opposing marriage. Grace Galloway confided to her journal, “Never get tied to a man / for when once you are yoked / Tis all a mere joke / of seeing your freedom again.”19
Alternative Ideals

The great authority of the traditional patriarch seemed to be at odds with the more egalitarian ethic of republicanism, but the reality was more complex. R. W. K. Hinton remarks that patriarchal fathers could not fully rule their families as long as they were subjected to the king’s superior authority. Thus, when rebellious Americans attacked the monarchy, denounced centralized power, and weakened external controls on paternal governance, they made it easier for family heads to exercise authority with minimal external intervention. American law continued to support men’s patriarchal powers in their families well beyond the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the destabilization of the traditional ideal diminished its dominance, and the Revolution stimulated the development of new gender discourses and alternative models of manhood.

One alternative was what Michael Kimmel calls the “aristocratic manhood” of the “the genteel patriarch.” A worthy man was someone who adhered to a British upper-class code of honor, cultivated manhly sensibilities, relied on inherited wealth or rent on land to support his lifestyle, sired legitimate male heirs to perpetuate his family dynasty, and promoted civic order through philanthropy and public service. An American did not need a title to achieve aristocratic manhood, but he found it immensely helpful to be born into a family that was sufficiently wealthy and cultivated to provide him a proper liberal education, lessons in “manners, taste, and character,” and sufficient land and patrimony to become an independent man who established his own family, dispensed patronage, and wielded local authority.

Richard Bushman points out that one paradox of the Revolution was that patriots associated aristocracy with corruption but still sought to capture “aristocratic culture for use in republican society.” Men of middling means bought books to teach themselves the details of genteel speech and conduct; they purchased homes and objects that testified to their refined status; and they sought social respectability by admission to the ranks of polite society and participation in public leadership. Even “the rustic,” wrote John Perkins, could appreciate and emulate “the gentle manner and obliging behavior of the well-bred and polite.” Often, men who pursued the aristocratic ideal saw women as fellow travelers on the road to refinement. Timothy Dwight stated that refinement “raised both men and women above the brutes . . . to make them kindly, cheerful, and modest.”

However, the attraction of aristocratic manhood was limited. Men who cultivated their sensibilities were vulnerable to charges of effeminacy. Ameri-
cans made a fine distinction between manly gentility and unmanly servitude to fad and fashion. G. J. Barker-Benfield reports that men could take refinement only so far, “or it would become effeminacy.” That was why a grandfather who noticed his grandson’s too great affection for his mother worried lest the boy’s “affection should overcome his manhood.” Furthermore, male refinement meant keeping up appearances, which could be deceiving. Popular literature portrayed the licentious libertine as a man with “a polished exterior” that masked an “unmanly ambition of conquering the defenseless,” while political commentators portrayed the demonic demagogue as a man who pretended refinement to seduce and manipulate the brutish masses.23 An American male might seek aristocratic manhood for himself but still distrusted its corrupting influence on others.

Another alternative was “republican manhood.” This ideal devalued family background, breeding, wealth, and manners to emphasize manly virtue, sociability, and civic-mindedness. The exemplar of republican manhood was the independent farmer who worked his land to ensure his family’s subsistence and security as well as his sons’ patrimony, established kinlike relations with neighbors, and participated in public activities, including militia service. An allied exemplar was the master artisan who owned his shop, passed on trade skills to his sons, earned respect as a useful contributor to the community, and joined social and political organizations committed to fostering the public good. The republican farmer or craftsman mostly went about his own business and allowed local elites to conduct public affairs. However, he staked his manly independence on his willingness to challenge upper-class corruption and elite domination when necessary. For example, Philadelphia artisans generally deferred to merchant and professional leaders but, at crucial moments, organized against them.24

Fictional representations of republican manhood emphasized virtue and independence. In Royall Tyler’s play “The Contrast,” Colonel Manly was a model of honesty, courage, and commitment. He respected his ancestors, emulated the “illustrious Washington” by fighting in the Revolution, and defended liberty for posterity. Manly had an aide but he was no “servant.” The aide affirmed, “I am a true blue son of liberty . . . Father said that I should come as Colonel Manly’s waiter . . . but no man shall master me.” A republican man sought happiness with a republican woman. He kept company with worthy women; admired their virtues more than their beauty; respected their reason, education, and skills; married one out of mutual affection; and then relied on his republican wife to keep him virtuous and raise patriotic children. Judith Sargent Murray contended that a republican man found fulfillment in
a companionable family organized by “the united efforts of male and female.”

This ideal was suited to a republican age, but it still failed to become dominant. Male misogyny persisted and periodically resurfaced to favor the traditional patriarch, for example, in post-Revolution evangelical churches. Also, many people doubted that most men could or would live up to republican standards of manly virtue. Caroline Robbins reminds us that republicanism was generally quite elitist, assuming the necessity of a propertied ruling class to control the “scum” who made up the democratic masses. Finally, the republican ideal may have been born to obsolescence. Gordon Wood, Joyce Appleby, and John Diggins argue that early America’s republican rhetoric was accompanied by a more powerful liberal individualism and materialism that guided men’s actual conduct. Writers may have felt driven to idealize republican manhood because they sensed its imminent demise.

The third alternative to the traditional patriarch was “self-made manhood.” This ideal associated manhood with individualism, materialism, and an entrepreneurial spirit. The new man-on-the-make repressed carnality, avoided alcohol and gambling, and sublimated his desires into competition for accumulation. He did not oppose the other ideals of manhood so much as harness them to his own economic ends. He learned that a reputation for good manners and sober morality could facilitate commercial transactions and business success. Indeed, Americans who exemplified self-made manhood eventually transformed aristocratic sensibilities and republican morality into the highly prized “bourgeois respectability” of nineteenth-century America.

The self-made man was not an isolated, selfish individual. He was a married man who competed in the marketplace to provision and protect his family. He was like George Mason, who explained to his son that he speculated in frontier property not for himself but to ensure his family’s comfort for years to come. Furthermore, the self-made man headed a family partnership. He managed any property his wife brought into the marriage, supervised her paid and unpaid labor during the marriage, detailed her role in transmitting family property to the next generation, and sometimes organized and sold his family’s labor at home or in factories. Finally, the self-made man was sociable. He belonged to social clubs and fraternal organizations that combined self-improvement efforts and fraternal camaraderie. These groups often encouraged entrepreneurship but usually kept it within the bounds of civility.

Two recent histories of American manhood declare the “triumph of the self-made man” who cultivated “self-improvement, self-control, self-interest, and self-advancement” in the early republic. In fact, the ideal of self-made
manhood was the most controversial alternative. Writers, ministers, and politicians equated self-interest to selfishness and factionalism; they attacked materialism as a spur to greed, gambling, profligacy, luxury, conflict, crime, and violence. Commentators who recognized men’s grasping nature as an immutable reality rarely idealized it; instead, they tried to cushion its destructive impact. Certainly, the idea that men should be free to make economic decisions to achieve comfort without political restraint was popularized by Jeffersonians in the 1790s but, as Louis Hartz has argued, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that American culture was able “to electrify the democratic individual with a passion for great achievement and produce a personality type that was. . . the hero of Horatio Alger.”

America’s mainstream culture of manhood was further complicated by economic, religious, and regional variations of the traditional ideal and its alternatives. Farmers, artisans, gentlemen, Baptists, Congregationalists, northern commercial men, southern planters, and various fraternal groups relied on selective aspects of manhood to isolate dissenters, forge solidarity in their own ranks, build influential coalitions, and defeat opposing interests. Simultaneously, a libertine counterculture cast doubt on all major variations of manhood, while the uncertain gender status of African and Indian males added confusion to the mix. No one knew with confidence whether one alternative or another would predominate, what syntheses might emerge, or if America’s multiple masculinities pointed in any discernible direction. The contested old ideal endured alongside the competing newer ones. The chief limit on the cultural diversity of manhood was a general consensus that three norms were central to all manly ideals.

One consensual norm was that manhood required the economic and political independence sometimes known as “manly freedom.” A traditional patriarch relied on rents; a man in search of aristocratic manhood was likely to have a profession; a republican farmer worked his land, a craftsman his shop; and a self-made man acquired and invested capital. An independent man was self-supporting. He determined the nature and pace of his labor and kept free of others’ patronage and government relief. He could afford to have his own conscience and demanded the liberty to exercise his conscientious will in public. He claimed a right to resist any government that threatened to rob him of liberty and property, and he felt entitled to participate in public deliberations and decision making. A “man” was an independent agent of his personal and public destiny.

The second consensual norm was that a mature man was a family man. A traditional patriarch governed a family estate, assisted by his wife and perpet-
uated by his sons; an aspirant to aristocratic manhood established a respectable family dynasty by wedding a genteel lady and teaching proper manners to his children; a republican farmer or artisan called on his wife to contribute to family welfare and passed on his land and skills to his sons; a self-made man entered into a lifetime partnership with his wife to build a family business and produce sons to sustain and enlarge it. The ubiquitous belief that every man should mature into the head of a family was predicated on the expectation that married men were relatively responsible and trustworthy men. For most Americans, manhood, marriage, and stability were nearly synonymous.

The third consensual norm was that manhood opposed womanhood. Joan Gundersen suggests that Americans used “a system of negative reference” to define manhood. An independent man was someone who was not a dependent woman or a slave to “effeminacy.” Americans also defined a mature man as someone who controlled women. Many years after the Revolution, Americans could still describe a married man as a “king in his family.” Critics of tyrannical husbands rarely questioned their authority over women but simply demanded that they conduct themselves with greater civility toward women. Even Judith Sargent Murray’s argument for “Equality of the Sexes” conceded male “superiority” to the extent that man was naturally meant to be woman’s “protector” and woman was naturally suited to transact “domestick affairs.”

**Manhood as an Oppositional Concept**

Scholars have demonstrated that Western culture commonly defined manhood in opposition to womanhood. Nancy Hartsock writes that classical Greek theorists associated manhood with wisdom, virtue, and citizenship but tied womanhood to “dangerous, disorderly, and irrational forces” in conflict with truth and the public good. Hanna Pitkin reads Machiavelli’s republicanism as a story about male protagonists who seek manhood by conquering *Fortuna*, a symbol for treacherous women and antagonistic female forces such as sexuality, dependence, seduction, manipulation, fury, mystery, and chance. Men strive for independence, but *Fortuna* “threatens a man’s self-control, his mastery of his own passions.” Men who overcome destructive female forces achieve the liberty and civic virtue that constitute manhood and citizenship; those who fail suffer personal instability, social disorder, and political chaos. As such, “The feminine constitutes the other . . . opposed to manhood and autonomy in all their senses: to maleness, to adulthood, to humanness, and to
politics.” Carole Pateman provides a complementary reading of modern liberal theory as a tale about men who forge a sexual contract to subordinate women and insulate political society against “the disorder of women,” whose “bodily natures and sexual passions” threaten to subvert the rule of law.33

Similarly, late-eighteenth-century Americans assessed male worth in opposition to female disorders. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that Americans equated manhood to self-control, productivity, virtue, and independence but linked womanhood (a “negative other”) to seduction, deceit, luxury, and dependence. Linda Kerber dissects Americans’ “gender-specific” citizenship to reveal concepts of ownership, military service, suffrage, and civic virtue that wed public life to male prerogative over disorderly women. Ruth Bloch states that Americans reproduced gender domination by urging patriots to seek manly “glory” and conquer female vices such as “idleness, luxury, dependence.” Philip Greven suggests that Americans construed the Revolution as a choice between republican “manliness” and monarchic “femininity” and, Susan Juster adds, they carried on the Revolution “against, not merely without, women.” Joan Gundersen, Christine Stansell, and Judith Shklar all agree that patriots “heightened and reinforced” their claim to independence by contrasting it to female dependence. Joan Hoff contends that the framers institutionalized male rights, interests, and opportunities in a market society regulated by a “masculine system of justice” and “the masculinity of the Constitution.” Joyce Appleby summarizes the result: “The liberal hero was male.” His proper companion, Jan Lewis concludes, was the “republican wife” who managed her family’s moral reclamation and civic education.34

Scholars of American manhood generally agree that late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans perpetuated gender opposition. Rotundo identifies the liberal language of the founding era with “the male self,” and Kimmel pinpoints “femininity” as the “negative pole” against which men defined themselves. David Pugh argues that the Sons of Liberty displaced their anxieties onto malignant “female qualities” such as “smothering materialism and effeminate inaction,” while Michael Rogin suggests that the Jacksonian Era’s male mystique was part of men’s struggle “to rescue sons from maternal power.” Joe Dubbert characterizes the nineteenth century as an era when male “domination, supremacy, and control” in public life stood in opposition to women’s moralism in private life. Finally, Kimmel and Peter Filene ascribe a late-nineteenth-century “crisis of masculinity” to male fears that women were making boys effeminate.35

Remarkably, the academic accord that Americans defined manhood against womanhood is supported by a wealth of cultural evidence but a dearth
of direct political evidence. One can review thousands of pages of founding-era political documents that dwell on virtually every aspect of men’s relations without encountering more than a rare reference to women’s existence. Political discourse was male-centered, as if men were doing what came naturally when they presumed to monopolize power and ignore women’s potential or presence as public persons. Christine Stansell points out that female figures were omnipresent in literature but “almost invisible” in politics. *The Federalist Papers* was typical. It spoke volumes about male power and politics but provided only two tertiary comments about women. When writers and speakers actually injected women into political discourse, they usually did so to make a point about men. For example, John Adams discussed women’s exclusion from suffrage to show that unpropertied men also should be excluded. Anna Jónasdóttir’s insight into Hobbes and Locke also applies to Adams and his contemporaries: “Women are used as a device of argument only to be deftly shuffled out of sight once they have served their purpose.”

Still, gender opposition did have a substantial indirect influence on political discourse. To begin, it shaped the philosophical foundations of American political thought. Genevieve Lloyd observes that “the maleness of reason” was deeply embedded in Western political thought. Conceptions of manhood and reason “have been formed within structures of dominance” that declared “the Man of Reason” superior to women. Carole Pateman analyzes early modern political theory to expose male thinkers’ belief that only “men possess the capacities required for citizenship, in particular, they are able to use their reason to sublimate their passions” and “internalize the universal rules of socio-political order.” Male theorists believed that women, in contrast, were driven by passions that clouded their reason, subverted their commitment to universal justice, and legitimized their exclusion from politics.

We can read the indirect influence of gender opposition between the lines of writings that populated the state of nature with rational men who voluntarily chose to enter civil society and establish a government of law. American authors usually assumed that women’s inability to harness reason and discipline passion precluded them from participation in political life. Women were nowhere to be found in most states of nature. Theophilus Parsons was unusual because he was explicit about why political manhood required female exclusion. Parsons emphasized the importance of wisdom, learning, and discretion in politics, and favored a presumption that all males over twenty-one years had ample intelligence to participate. Simultaneously, he favored the rule that all women be viewed “as not having sufficient discretion,” and he disqualified them from politics. True, he argued, women had “no deficiency in their men-
tal powers.” However, it was dangerous for them to develop reason and practice politics lest “promiscuous intercourse with the world” ruin “the natural tenderness and delicacy of their minds, their retired mode of life, and various domestic duties.”38 Political manhood meant ruling women for their own good.

Gender opposition was also embedded in the psychodynamics of early American political thought. Christine Di Stefano argues that modern political theorists constructed “configurations of masculinity” as misogynist attempts to achieve “clean and ultimate release from the (m)other.” Male thinkers desired women but feared dependence on them. They projected their “irresolute masculinity” into political theories that thickened the connection between political manhood and female subordination. Similarly, Kenneth Lockridge argues that eighteenth-century American males constructed images of manhood based on contempt for women. Men desired women for sexual pleasure and reproduction but feared their engulfing sexuality and malignant power. Reacting as if “patriarchy is in imminent danger of becoming matriarchy,” they expressed insecurity and rage by forging a misogynistic public identity based on intimidation and control of women.39 American men had powerful unconscious passions and gendered assumptions that infused patriarchal meaning into public phrases such as “All men are created equal.”

We can glimpse male misogyny in the common usage of the term effeminacy. Linda Kerber suggests that Americans equated “effeminacy” to “timidity, dependence, and foppishness.” For example, Samuel Adams opposed “effeminate” refinements that seduced men into the self-indulgence and corruption associated with disorderly women. Samuel Williams criticized profligate men for creating “an emaciated feeble race, degraded by effeminacy and weakness,” that was “unmanly” and “incapable of manly exertions.” Only men who mastered female vices could ward off tyranny and establish a republic. However, not all uses of effeminacy conveyed gender opposition or misogyny. John Adams hinted at gender similarity when criticizing both “my own sex” and “American ladies” for “luxury, dissipations, and effeminacy.” And Mercy Otis Warren was not expressing misogyny toward women when criticizing General William Howe for enjoying “effeminate and reprehensible pleasures . . . in the arms of a handsome adulteress” rather than doing his civic duty.40

We can also detect gender opposition in founding-era metaphors. Speakers and writers often defined political manhood as a matter of controlling symbolic female figures who were typically blamed for public disorder. The figures included “Fortune” (a coy woman who needed to be tamed), “Fancy” (an enchantress), “Trade” (a lady who needed to be courted), and “Popular-
ity” (an adulteress). Some oppositional metaphors conveyed a mixed message. Thomas Paine portrayed the Revolution as the struggle of a maturing American male against a grasping British mother, and as a conflict pitting patriots defending manly freedom against corrupt governors hoping to seduce them back into female dependence. Paine also portrayed the Revolution in terms of all-male rivalry. He considered it a filial revolt against a despotic royal father, as well as the case of a wealthy ward fighting off a covetous guardian. Political manhood opposed womanhood, but it also opposed male tyranny and avarice, and an assortment of male failings.

Quite often, Americans defined political manhood in opposition to African slavery. Judith Shklar suggests that a white male’s sense of personal dignity, social worth, and citizenship was largely a function of distinguishing himself “from slaves and occasionally from women.” She emphasizes that citizenship was mostly conceived as a denial of slavery. White males measured their public worth by their distance from slave status. The main marker of that distance was the right to vote, which functioned as “a certificate of full membership in society” that had a “capacity to confer a minimum of social dignity.” Men without the ballot saw themselves and were seen by other men as second-class citizens approaching “the dreaded condition of the slave.”

Northern writers regularly suggested that political manhood required opposition to slavery. James Dana argued that “our liberty as men, citizens, and Christians” demanded that “we set ourselves to banish all slavish principles” and “unite to abolish slavery.” Southern writers often suggested that white political manhood was strengthened by its juxtaposition to slavery. David Ramsay wrote that white men’s “spirit of liberty” was nurtured by daily reminders of the degradation of slavery; Timothy Ford believed that white men felt stimulated to defend liberty “to avoid being confounded with the blacks”; John Taylor added that white men’s affection for liberty was heightened by “the sight of slavery.” If white manhood contrasted with slavery, what was the gender identity of male slaves? Enslaved black males had no clear gender identity. They were mostly seen as outsiders lacking the manly reason to discipline their passions and the manly freedom to provision and protect their families. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s “American Farmer” was typical: he abhorred slavery but could not imagine including African slaves among the mix of immigrants who could “become men” within the new race “called Americans.”

Often, Americans defined manhood in opposition to boyhood. A mature man was a self-supporting adult who defended liberty, fulfilled family responsibilities, and governed women. His opposite was the “boy,” “libertine,”
or “bachelor of age” who was lustful, impulsive, and avaricious rather than disciplined; self-centered instead of family-oriented; and socially destructive, not politically constructive. This contrast was standard fare in political discourse. For example, Noah Webster portrayed the French Revolution as a contest between the mature males who originally fought for “liberty and the rights of men” and later Jacobin rebels who united “the littleness of boys” with “the barbarity of Goths.” Activists criticized political opponents by likening them to “giddy youth” or by patronizing them as “restless, vigorous, luxurious youth prematurely emancipated from the authority of a parent.” The idiom of male rivalry was potent because Americans believed that a “man” deserved the rights of men, but a “boy” needed to be governed.

Sometimes, manhood was not an oppositional concept but a conjuncture of female and male characteristics. American culture considered both men and women to be disorderly creatures, disposed to seduce and be seduced. Writers criticized women for manipulating male passions and men for preying on female innocence. They worried about young women being corrupted by rogues and naive male citizens being abused by demagogues. Also, both sexes seemed to share many vices. Benjamin Franklin noted women’s intemperance and men’s “more frequent” intemperance, as well as women’s fickleness and men’s “wavering and inconstant” ways. Overall, however, commentators thought men were the more disruptive sex. The coquette’s vices mainly threatened her own well-being. Hannah Webster Foster’s novel The Coquette tells of a “young, gay, volatile” girl who rejected a virtuous suitor for “a designing libertine” only to suffer a premature death. By contrast, the libertine epitomized what Alexander Hamilton called men’s “ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious” nature which imperiled female innocence, family integrity, the bonds of society, and legitimate political authority.

A disorderly female subdued passion and achieved womanhood by way of marriage, submission to a husband, and motherhood. A disorderly male subdued passion and achieved manhood by way of marriage, family responsibility, and fatherhood. America’s ideal couple produced order and procreated the future. But men claimed superior procreative powers: they sired children, women only carried them. Jefferson’s fantasy of men reproducing without women was reflected in Joel Barlow’s satirical poem “The Hasty Pudding,” where a farmer’s vitality (and virility) was confirmed by the fact that “Ten sturdy freeman sprung from him.” Men also procreated culture, society, and the nation. Carole Pateman remarks that modern male thinkers claimed “the procreative powers of both a mother and a father” and took credit for “masculine creation of (giving birth to) social and political order.” In early Amer-
ica’s male fantasies, female disorders and procreative powers were inferior; in early America’s patriarchal politics, disorderly men were the primary problem, procreative men the primary problem solvers.

**Disorderly Men**

The destabilization of the traditional patriarch, the emergence of alternative ideals, and the instability of gender relations disrupted the lives of American men. Satires mocking married men as both brutal tyrants and effeminate slaves became commonplace. Family men’s expectations that they should rule dependents were disappointed in some degree by wives’ agency and sons’ mobility. Some men reacted with an antimarital ideology; others channeled misogyny into revitalizing the traditional ideal; many experimented with the new alternatives; and most muddled through the confusion. Commentators worried that gender turbulence eroded men’s commitment to family life and intensified male licentiousness. They warned that men who failed to marry, refused family responsibility, or forswore legitimate fatherhood lacked proper self-restraint, engaged in destructive vices, and often lured sober men into depravity. The specter of masses of disorderly men causing chaos became more terrifying to civic leaders when the revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and equality weakened traditional restraints on male conduct and strengthened men’s claims to individual rights against authority.

In 1766, Jonathan Mayhew congratulated colonists for defending liberty against the Stamp Act but quickly condemned them for “riotous and felonious proceedings” compounded by cloaking their “rapacious violences with the pretext of zeal for liberty.” Mayhew warned that some American men had lost “all sense of religion, virtue, and good order” and caused a “state of general disorder approaching so near to anarchy” that they almost brought on “more dreadful scenes of blood and slaughter.” For the next forty years, public officials were haunted by visions of disorderly men indulging democratic desire as an excuse for venting passion and renewing earlier scenes of bloodshed and slaughter. It was not until 1805 that Thomas Jefferson was ready to declare a “union of sentiment now manifested so generally as auguring harmony and happiness to our future course.” Even then, Fisher Ames warned that only “grown children” were so foolish as to believe that men’s licentiousness, factionalism, and mobbish conduct had been cured.47

Why were men so apt to transform claims to liberty and equality into disorderly conduct? A frequent explanation was that males were inherently pas-
sionate, lustful, impulsive, greedy, manipulative, unpredictable creatures. That is, they were just like women. Benjamin Franklin highlighted men’s passionate nature in a satire about “Celia Single,” who sought to set straight the public record in a letter to the editor:

I have several times in your paper seen severe reflections upon us women for idleness and extravagance, but I do not remember to have once seen any such animadversions upon the men. If I were disposed to be censorious, I could furnish you with instances enough. I might mention Mr. Billiard who spends more than he earns at the green table . . . Mr. Finikin who has seven different suits of fine clothes and wears a change every day while his wife and children sit at home half naked . . . Mr. Crownhim who is always dreaming over the checkerboard . . . Mr. T’Otherpot the tavern-hunter.48

Franklin spent a lifetime satirizing male vices to mark out the common failings of men and women. And Jefferson entertained the radical proposition that men were more enslaved by ardor and ignorance than women. His correspondence with Maria Cosway proclaimed the dominion of a man’s “heart” over his “head,” and his educational plan for his daughter assumed a “fourteen to one” chance that she would marry “a blockhead” and be forced to manage her own family.49 Note that Franklin and Jefferson were optimists about male virtue and reason compared to misanthropes such as Alexander Hamilton and Noah Webster.

A related explanation was that male passions were particularly troublesome at a time when traditional restraints on male conduct were crumbling. Colonial America had been dominated by two ranks of men who, according to Gordon Wood, “had different psyches, different emotional makeups, different natures.” Gentlemen were “great-souled” men “driven by passions that ordinary people could never comprehend, by pride, by honor, and by ‘a prospect of an immortality in the memories of all the worthy to the end of time.’” Commoners were mainly farmers whose lives were shaped by the need to extract a living from the land to provision their families. What commoners most wanted “was sons to whom they could pass on their land and who would continue the family name.”50 These two ranks were bound together in equality and inequality. They shared responsibilities as family fathers who supported, protected, and managed dependents; they were freeholders with the historical rights and responsibilities of Englishmen; and they were driven by a shared desire to produce a memorable patrimony for posterity. Still, gentlemen were superiors, commoners inferiors; gentlemen cultured, commoners coarse; gentlemen patrons, commoners patronized; gentlemen militia officers, commoners
rank-and-file militiamen; gentlemen governors, commoners governed. Colonial men existed within traditional, complex hierarchies constructed of personal ties, mutual obligations, cultural rituals, and the politics of preference and deference.

However, America’s hierarchical bonds were comparatively weak. Gentlemen had no formal titles, special legal status, or inherited political privileges. They relied on family name, education, talent, wealth, generosity, and reputation to achieve personal honor, social dignity, and political authority. Meanwhile, commoners’ subordinate status was compromised by America’s abundance of land, its opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, and the rapid population growth that encouraged young men to seek opportunity on the frontier or in the city. American colonists sustained a fragile balance between male hierarchy and social fluidity until their opposition to the Stamp Act overspilled the boundaries of political protest. Thereafter, Bernard Bailyn suggests, “Defiance to constituted authority leaped like a spark from one flammable area to another, growing in heat as it went.” Any systematic effort to impose order on the ranks of men by subordinating some men and elevating others was sure to provoke public consternation.

On the one hand, Americans were enthusiasts for liberty. Indeed, they claimed *exceptional* liberty against hierarchical authority. James Otis, Jr., argued in 1764, “The colonists are entitled to as ample rights, liberties, and privileges as the subjects of the mother country and, in some respects, to more.” Why more? American farmers and English freeholders were born with identical natural and constitutional rights; but American men merited exceptional liberty because they had carved a new world out of the wilderness while Englishmen wallowed in old-world corruption. In particular, Americans demanded extraordinary “natural, inherent, and inseparable rights as men and citizens” to individual liberty against royal governors and to local political autonomy against parliamentary authority. Anyone who appeared to deprive American men of their exceptional liberty stood accused of seeking to emasculate and enslave them.

On the other hand, many leaders feared that this enthusiasm for liberty generated what David Ramsay called “undecided claims and doubtful rights” that were likely to be abused by disorderly men, who excelled at “disturbing the freest governments that were ever devised.” Disturbances often took the form of mob action. John Adams complained in 1774, “These private mobs I do and will detest. . . . these tarring and featherings, this breaking open of houses by rude and insolent rabble . . . in pursuance of private prejudices and passions must be discountenanced.” George Washington was outraged in July
1776 when a celebration of independence ended with soldiers toppling a statue of George III. His “General Orders” stated, “Though the General doubts not the persons who pulled down and mutilated the statue . . . were actuated by zeal in the public cause, yet it has so much the appearance of riot and want of order . . . that he disapproves the manner and directs in the future these things shall be . . . left to be executed by proper authority.” Leaders worried that most men recognized no proper authority.

How could men reconcile democratic desire and political authority? Ideally, men showed self-restraint in the exercise of liberty and voluntarily obeyed their chosen leaders. However, John Adams felt that patriots’ demands for liberty were so excessive that self-restraint and obedience were doubtful. In 1776, he used Abigail’s plea to remember the ladies as an occasion to express his fear that Americans’ revolutionary claims jeopardized all authority: “We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their masters.” Decades later, Adams argued that claims to liberty had become so extreme that men refused to defer to superior authority or even recognize their superiors. “Some years ago,” he explained, “a writer unfortunately made use of the term better sort. Instantly, a popular clamor was raised and an odium excited which remains to this day to such a degree that no man dares to employ that expression at the bar, in conversation, in a newspaper, or pamphlet, no, nor in the pulpit.” Critics lambasted Adams for saying aloud what many leaders quietly believed: American men were too disorderly to be trusted with liberty unless they learned to temper democratic passions and defer to the better sort.

American intellectuals were brilliant at making abstract distinctions between liberty and license to persuade men to temper passion and defer to authority. But their philosophical analyses had a little impact on men’s willingness to exercise self-restraint or obey government. Abstract political language had become so slippery that it was as easily used against as in favor of authority. Terence Ball, J. G. A. Pocock, and Joyce Appleby point out that concepts such as “liberty” and “equality” or “republic” and “democracy” were contested, revised, and recouined during the founding era. Most intellectuals did little to clarify their language. They were part of what Jay Fliegelman identifies as an “elocutionary revolution” that encouraged speakers and writers to de-emphasize the clarity, logic, and evidence that appealed to men’s minds and instead to emphasize the theatricality, metaphor, imagery, myth, and body language that moved men’s passions. Political leaders seeking to counteract democratic
disorders needed to employ language and concepts that appealed to men’s passions, indeed, to their very identities as males.55

The Politics of Coercion and Consent

The American founders encompassed several generations of thinkers, speakers, writers, ministers, activists, soldiers, and statesmen who conceived and contributed to the struggle for independence and the creation of the Republic. They included local and national political elites who opposed the old regime and constructed new ones. Though a diverse lot, the founders shared an enduring and sometimes obsessive fear that disorderly men would generate chaos in society, endanger hard-won liberty, and imperil the Republic. They hoped to fend off democratic disorders by stabilizing gender relations and by promoting hegemonic norms to stigmatize disorderly men and reward stable men.

First, the founders stabilized gender relations by depoliticizing opposition between men and women and by reinforcing the ideal of the traditional patriarch. They mostly restricted gender turbulence to the cultural sphere and thereby fostered fraternal politics. They regularly discussed and debated men’s liberty, equality, citizenship, and leadership without mentioning women; they often heaped honors on patriotic men who fought the Revolution without giving much recognition to patriotic women who participated in it. When the war ended, “Women disappeared from the public eye.”56 Thereafter, the founders framed a new republic without considering women’s place in it or experiencing much pressure to question women’s exclusion from it. They could perpetuate women’s subordination because republican and liberal ideology invited them to do so, male misogyny and uncertainty gave them an incentive to do so, and their political priorities urged them to do so.

Republican ideology equated absolute kingship with absolute corruption. Republican thinkers were much less critical of family patriarchs, whose power was ostensibly limited by law and softened by affection. As such, their criticism of monarchy did not necessarily apply to domestic patriarchy. Liberal ideology widened the chasm between politics and family life by separating public and paternal power. It made the language of liberty and equality appropriate for the public sphere but allowed a traditional idiom of natural hierarchy to persist in the domestic sphere. The founders took advantage of these ideological openings to defy political tyranny and depoliticize men’s authority in their families. Revolutionaries fought against monarchy, not family
patriarchy. Legislators disputed aristocratic laws, not patriarchal laws. Governors forfeited royal prerogative over men, but fathers and husbands maintained patriarchal prerogative over women’s bodies, behavior, and property. The result was that misogynists remained free to vent patriarchal rage against women, and ambivalent males were cued to resolve uncertainties about manhood in favor of the traditional patriarch, who retained the coercive authority “to intimidate, not to accommodate” women.57

Simultaneously, the founders’ political priorities urged them to keep women off the public agenda. Most founders feared that disorderly men threatened to destroy liberty by unleashing the twin evils of mob anarchy and demagogic tyranny. Accordingly, they focused much of their intellectual and political energy on encouraging men to defend liberty and show great restraint when exercising it. The founders would have had to compromise their focus on male mobilization and quiescence to debate women’s rights or deal with prejudices regarding public women. Politicizing gender certainly would have meant deepening male discontents, while admitting women to political discourse would have invited the sexual improprieties and political corruption often associated with the “public woman.”58 The founders focused on restoring order among men; they relied on still powerful family patriarchs to subdue disorderly women.

Historical possibilities for democratizing family life did not translate into enhanced prospects for political equality. Women were mostly eliminated from political discourse and politics—but they were not forgotten. Some founders sensed that women’s exclusion fortified fraternal unity among otherwise disorderly males. Carole Pateman explains that men’s monopoly of citizenship and leadership provided them “a common interest as men” in sharing power over women. Meanwhile, most founders believed that men were more apt to defend liberty and exercise it with self-restraint when courting, betrothed, or wed to respectable women. Noah Webster calculated that a man’s best defense against “a dissipated life” was a fondness for “ladies of character.”59 In sum, the founders appealed to men’s patriarchal interests and fraternal instincts by reaffirming their coercive power over women, reinforcing women’s exclusion from politics, and recruiting virtuous women to encourage men’s good behavior.

Second, the founders enlisted Christian morality, republican virtue, liberal self-interest, and public education along with women’s benign influence in the cause of taming men’s passions, encouraging male responsibility, ensuring their orderly conduct, and promoting mass compliance to legitimate authority. They also framed innovative political institutions to neutralize men’s pas-
sions and cushion the consequences of their disorderly conduct. And like most elites, the founders sought to establish hegemony and secure stability by soliciting men’s consent and quiescence.

Historically, Antonio Gramsci observes, elites not only “request” consent but “educate it.” They establish hegemony by raising “the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level.” They use cultural norms to perform “a positive educative function” by promoting ways of thinking, speaking, and acting conducive to mass compliance; and they operate coercive institutions to discharge “a negative educative function” by penalizing subversive ideas, words, and deeds. Hegemony is “protected by the armor of coercion.” Elites’ attempt to establish hegemony is not always a self-conscious, systematic effort to make culture function as an instrument of mass subordination. Raymond Williams suggests that hegemony is more of “a lived, social process” in which elites organize the various and shifting “meanings and values” that saturate people’s lives. Hegemony is never static because it is continually “renewed, recreated, defended, and modified,” as well as “resisted, limited, altered, challenged.”

R. W. Connell adds that the struggle for hegemony often involves the culture of manhood. Male elites promote a “hegemonic masculinity” that deploys norms of manhood to justify dominant authority and encourage mass deference to it. Elites also foster “conservative” or “complicit masculinities” that urge men to accept and benefit from dominant male norms and institutions; and they identify, stigmatize, and punish “subordinated” or “marginal masculinities” that potentially undermine political stability. Unlike ideologies that appeal to men’s minds, hegemonic masculinity taps into the deepest recesses of men’s psychosexual, social, and political identities. Many scholars believe that one of men’s strongest motives has involved male rivalry. Men have found it exhilarating to be elevated above other men; and they have felt degraded when treated “as a boy and not a man.” By controlling the criteria for male elevation and degradation, elites who join hegemony to manhood significantly strengthen their ability to secure men’s consent and quiescence.

That is what American founders did. They promoted hegemonic masculinity as part of their effort to restrain disorderly male passions, temper men’s democratic desires, restore fraternal order, and reconstitute political authority. They advanced a coherent conception and language of manhood based on the consensual norms that enjoined males to establish independence, start families, and govern dependents to achieve manhood and procreate new generations. They stigmatized, sanctioned, and reformed disorderly men, whose marginal masculinity associated them with dependency, effeminacy,
immaturity, and sterility. They rewarded the complicit masculinity of men who conformed to consensual norms by recognizing their social merit and citizenship. And they promised immortal fame along with social status and political authority to extraordinary men who, like themselves, procreated a new nation and glorious future for humankind.

The founders also appropriated aspects of America’s contested ideals of manhood to stabilize and fine-tune the male pecking order of the new republic. For example, they attacked the self-interested manhood of males who failed to settle into family life, but they generally applauded the self-interested manhood of married men who worked to protect and provision their families. Moreover, they emphasized the ideal of republican manhood when defining citizenship but drew more heavily on images of aristocratic manhood and traditional patriarchy to legitimize the political authority and prerogative of national leaders. The founders rarely debated the alternative ideals of manhood, but they habitually relied on them to educate the consent of the governed.

Judith Sargent Murray’s call for every American “to play the man for his country” conveyed two implicit but unmistakable messages. First, greater sexual equality may have been conceivable for the home, but men were to be the sole arbiters of the nation’s political fate. Second, all men may have been born free and equal, but each male had to measure up to standards of manhood to earn citizenship or merit leadership status. Murray’s language was not unusual. Indeed, it was a representative sample of the “grammar of manhood” that the founders used to promote hegemonic norms of manhood, secure men’s consent, define citizenship, and legitimize political authority.