

Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America. By THOMAS A. FOSTER. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. 223 pages. \$28.95 (cloth).

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Despite growing interest in the history of sexuality, there is a dearth of good monographs on such matters for colonial America. Thankfully, Thomas A. Foster has made a much-needed contribution with his intriguing new work. He argues that sexuality informed every aspect of a man's life in the eighteenth century: standing in the community, relations with other men, and even the ability to conduct business. In making this argument, Foster asserts that sexuality was understood as an intrinsic part of personhood long before Freud defined it as such, an idea Richard Godbeer hinted at in a 1995 *William and Mary Quarterly* article, where he suggested that early Americans accepted some men's preference for sex with other men. Foster locates sexual identity in all men, thus modifying Foucault's long-accepted claim that the early modern period did not recognize sexual identities, only sexual acts.¹ "Instead," Foster argues, "sexuality in eighteenth-century Massachusetts appears to be an inconsistent and shifting mixture of acts *and* identities" (xii). The book focuses on eighteenth-century Massachusetts, an increasingly popular setting for studying early American manhood. Foster's use of sources is creative and comprehensive. He samples from the traditional—court records and sermons—but reads these sources in the context of diaries, newspaper articles, and imported literature, which allows him to capture the richness of New England culture, a society firmly tied to its Puritan roots and part of a transatlantic discourse.

The book is divided into three sections, the first of which, "Household," explores how sexuality informed a man's relationship with his family. Foster details the pressures placed on husbands to procreate and to satisfy their wives physically and emotionally. He then investigates men who could not live up to these ideals: the impotent, incestuous, adulterous, and cuckolded. Such sexual failings were not simply private embarrassments; they signified a husband's lack of success as a man. Divorce records indicate that a husband's shortcomings in the bedroom and as a provider "were often inextricably fused together" (24).

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978); Richard Godbeer, "'The Cry of Sodom': Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 52, no. 2 (April 1995): 259–86.

The second section, "Community," examines how ideas of sexuality united and separated men. Rape and seduction were highly sensationalized, and Foster points out that "rape was a crime between men as well as a crime against a woman" (55). It was an affront to the father or husband of the victim and, when it involved those of low social standing, racial minorities, or strangers, "a crime against the masculine social order" (64). Foster complicates this picture by exploring the paradoxes of gender and sexual violence. Rape was evidence of a man's lack of self-mastery, yet "idealized masculine sexuality was informed by a dominant, aggressive model of male authority" (68). Likewise, novels and newspapers described women as both helpless victims and seducers, rakes, and false accusers to whom men were highly vulnerable. Sexuality also glued the community of men together, since gossip about sex promoted, secured, and destroyed reputations. Following rumors that he had impregnated Patience Converse, for example, Continental soldier Benjamin Gilbert conducted a letter-writing campaign to defend his honor. When this measure failed, he relocated to New York because rumors had destroyed his personal and commercial standing. As Foster notes, "In the realm of gossip, all worlds were collapsed into one reputation" (86).

The third section, "Sexualities," explores the intricate dialectic between outward appearance and intrinsic qualities. Foster begins with portrayals of effeminate bachelors, arguing that their foppish appearance and weak physical stature were seen as outward evidence of inner depravity. If a bachelor did not look masculine, he was associated with unmanly sexual practices such as sodomy and masturbation. Foster then moves to interracial sex, which received a substantial amount of attention in Massachusetts, though 97 percent of the colony was white. A white man who had sex with a woman of color lacked self-control, but when the situation was reversed, it threatened the social order. Newspapers portrayed black men as rapists by nature, thus further connecting sexual acts to interior qualities. Finally, Foster extends the argument to sodomites. In perhaps the most thorough investigation of sodomy in early America, Foster examines not just court cases but sermons on Sodom and Gomorrah, stories of British trials, and characters in novels such as Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748). Foster refutes the idea that sodomy was an indeterminate crime to which all men were susceptible, arguing instead that "sodomy in eighteenth-century Massachusetts was viewed as a marker of personhood, tied to an understanding of a man's sexual desires, and distinct from other vices, given this connection to the inner man" (163).

Foster's crisp, clear writing is especially noteworthy. The absence of illustrations is unfortunate, and readers wanting to fully appreciate the 1751 *Boston Evening-Post* woodcut disparaging Masons as sodomites should see Foster's 2003 article in the *Quarterly*.² A more troubling omission is the lack of a chapter explaining the demise of eighteenth-century sexuality. Foster sprinkles comments about the effects of the Revolution throughout the book, often tacking them on the ends of chapters. This practice produces several unresolved questions that beg attention. He notes that "in the last third of the eighteenth century, the image of the black male rapist faded from newspapers" (149), but he does not explore why. He also observes that "by the Revolutionary era, stories of sodomites no longer symbolized the need for all men to guard against sinful excesses, but rather described a minority concern irrelevant to the Massachusetts social setting" (174), but fails to explain this as well. A forward-looking epilogue could have addressed these questions and allowed him to better situate colonial sexuality in a larger historical context.

Like any good work, this one raises as many questions as it answers and should supply fertile ground for future scholarship. Foster's discussion of contradictions is particularly arresting. He contends that colonial men were caught between calls for self-control and the valorization of aggressive masculine sexuality, but he does not investigate this contradiction's significance or whether it was ever resolved. Given the centrality of self-control in Anne S. Lombard's study of manhood, Foster's decision to simply mark the contradiction is disappointing.³ Was the embrace of aggressive masculinity a challenge to popular mores, a democratization of sexuality, or part of the demise of eighteenth-century sexuality? Further, contradictions could be extended to other parts of Foster's work. He focuses on effeminate bachelors, yet men who had children out of wedlock also concerned eighteenth-century New Englanders. Similarly, it is curious that men who had sex with men had a unique sexual identity but white men who had sex with women of color did not. Yet such questions lie beyond the purview of Foster's book. Clearly written and solidly argued, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man* places sexuality at the center of early American manhood and breaks new ground in our understanding of sexual identity.

² Thomas A. Foster, "Antimasonic Satire, Sodomy, and Eighteenth-Century Masculinity in the *Boston Evening-Post*," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 60, no. 1 (January 2003): 171–84.

³ Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003). See also Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1999).