



## Book Reviews

***Men in Political Theory.*** By Terrell Carver. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2004. 263 pp. \$74.95 cloth.

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Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn  
Whitman College

What might it mean to ask about the standing of men in the traditional canon of Western political theory? One answer is familiar to us from various feminist readings: “Man” is that figure who masquerades as the generic or universal human being, thereby occluding his gender-specific character, as well as the ways in which that character renders women devalued or invisible. But might it be that men also appear in the canon as *men*, that is, as expressly gendered beings defined by their quest to fulfill normative conceptions of masculinity over which they exert but limited control?

This is the intriguing premise of Terrell Carver’s *Men in Political Theory*. Its chapters, which concern Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Engels, ask how each deploys representations of masculinity in formulating and responding to issues of political obligation, citizenship, equality, legitimacy, and so forth. (Carver acknowledges but sidesteps the question of how the traditional “canon” is itself constructed, as well as whether that construction may itself bear the imprint of gender.)

The book is most successful when it discusses the ways in which specific authors advance a hierarchy of competing conceptions of masculinity, which are themselves often inflected by considerations of race, ethnicity, and class, in order to differentiate and discipline political subjects, all of whom are men. For example, Carver shows that the work of Niccolò Machiavelli, the theorist whose conception of politics is perhaps most transparently predicated on a notion of manhood, is far more nuanced than it is often taken to be. Familiar feminist readings often draw from Machiavelli’s texts a conception of masculinity that in turn draws its

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principal inspiration from practices of warfare, as well as arts of manipulation and deception. But these practices and arts are not, as a rule, directed against women, for they are irrelevant to the world of politics. Rather, they are deployed against men whose performances of masculinity are, for one reason or another, deficient. It is those who risk rather than stand pat, who are cunning rather than witless, who are “plumed conquerors” and “grubby soldiers-of-fortune,” rather than “preening narcissists and other-worldly priests” (p. 108), who ultimately rule the political domain. And yet, Carver points out, even this reading is too simple, for one must also appreciate how those who best articulate Machiavelli’s normative code of masculinity are those who escape the snares of effeminacy, but without falling prey to the temptations of unthinking violence. The net result is to productively complicate Machiavelli’s “picture of masculinity by pluralising it, and, in particular, by finding subordinate or disavowed masculinities, against which his notion of *virtù* and other manly ideals for rulers, is made to shine” (p. 105).

The book is less successful in achieving its second stated purpose: to “show the depth and richness of these works . . . by drawing them into our times and politics, as political theorists are trained to do” (p. 252). For the most part, these efforts consist of what Carver himself labels “telegraphic” (p. 252) references to artifacts of contemporary culture (e.g., Woody Allen’s *Mighty Aphrodite* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*); to current policy debates (e.g., regarding the status of lesbians and gays in the military); to the possible contemporary implications of less familiar conceptions of masculinity embedded in the canon (e.g., that implicit in Jesus’ exhortation to “turn the other cheek”); and, finally, to the persistent manifestation of stubborn codes of masculinity in gangs, the sex trade, arms negotiations, and so forth.

Moreover, these contemporary references, as well as the readings that support them, occasionally seem to be informed by an account of gender, which, in certain respects, may vitiate the book’s principal virtues. Specifically, the book sometimes appears to presuppose a transcontextual conception of masculinity, which Carver most often refers to as “hegemonic” or, alternatively, as “alpha” masculinity. For example, in discussing Book I of Plato’s *Republic*, with respect to Thrasymachus’s outburst when argumentatively cornered by Socrates, Carver writes: “It is difficult to get much closer to hegemonic masculinity as we know it than his view that ‘might-right’” (p. 24). In much the same vein, in his chapter on Aristotle, following a discussion

of the *Politics*' elaboration of the distinction between slaves and free men, Carver states: "While hardly exhaustive as a characterization of hegemonic masculinity, Aristotle's idealization is certainly a start, and instantaneously recognisable today, where the alpha-male is pervasively signalled" (p. 52). And, finally, in his chapter on Engels, Carver suggests that "his feminism is just what we might expect from a man: full of knowingness about women, and near-deliberate recalcitrance about men" (p. 248).

Here, one is tempted to ask Carver for an explication of the common traits of masculinity that cross cultural and historical boundaries and so render such claims intelligible; those traits, however, are never articulated with the care they arguably deserve. Moreover, one is tempted to ask whether affirmation of the existence of "hegemonic masculinity" may sometimes occlude this code's desperate need to reaffirm itself in the face of challenges, as well as the fact that sometimes, albeit rarely, gendered performances simply collapse. We should not forget, for example, that Thrasymachus' ultimate response to his exposure by Socrates is not to fight back, not to be silenced, but to blush. In short, while it is certainly true that Thrasymachus "wants his superior view to win the 'battle', trouncing his opponent, as competitive masculinities dictate" (p. 24), it is equally true that when he is defeated in this war of wits, he effectively assumes the posture of a woman.

These difficulties aside, Carver has performed an important service, and his book bears reading by those looking for a useful complement to more familiar feminist readings. We might wish it were otherwise, but men in political theory are unlikely to fade away anytime soon, and so it behooves to ask just how they conceive of the always unfinished and often troubled project of masculinity.