

VIRTUS

28 | 2021



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The Grand Tour

A trial of aristocratic manhood

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Sarah Goldsmith, *Masculinity and danger on the eighteenth-century Grand Tour* (London: University of London Press, Institute of Historical Research, 2020, xiii + 272 p., index)

This first-rate book is an in-depth study of the ‘Grand Tour’ – the Continental journey, usually of three to four years, undertaken by young male members of the British aristocracy. Sarah Goldsmith provides a wealth of information on aspects of these Tours that should have been given more attention than they have been in previous literature on the subject. She does so using some contemporary published literature, but mostly letters, diaries, travel journals, tutor reports, privately circulated manuscripts, and trip itineraries, mainly for thirty Grand Tours that occurred between 1700 and 1780. Although she does not claim that the dangers and hardships of the Grand Tour have been totally ignored, she does believe they have been neglected in favour of a predominant interest in the pleasures of the Grand Tour and the cosmopolitan tastes, manners, and refinements it taught. She contends that it was regarded by many aristocratic families as a trial that served as a rite of passage before young men assumed adult roles.

Rejecting the notion that in a given place and time men are subject to a single hegemonic masculinity, Goldsmith asserts that in any society there exists more than one masculinity to which individuals seek to conform. The young men who went on a Grand Tour were guided by a remarkably large number of different ideals of masculinity, which we can group into several broad categories. Goldsmith explicitly distinguishes two categories, but I think she actually recognizes three. The first includes standards of physical skill, toughness, stoicism, endurance, courage, and daring, for which she adopts the generally used term ‘hardy mas-

culinity'. The second includes cosmopolitanism, grace, civility, sensibility, politeness, erudition, linguistic skills, and familiarity with Classical culture and history, which we can call refined masculinity. And the third includes maturity, rationality, prudence, self-control, and moral rectitude, which we can call responsible masculinity.

Many Grand Tourists could foresee a military career; and one of the common objectives of a Tour was to enable a young man to advance his military education. A good number of Tourists enrolled in one of the available Continental military academies for periods of time during their Tour. Many also visited the sites of historic military encounters in order to learn how terrain determined the course of the battle. No small number of Tourists actually visited regions experiencing war and witnessed the dangers of war at close hand. Some went so far as to join a Continental army as a volunteer, though the opportunities to do so declined during the eighteenth century.

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As emphasized in the conventional literature, Continental countries also provided British aristocrats with opportunities for developing their refined and responsible masculinities. Refined masculinity was enhanced when they visited Rome's ruins, attended educational institutions, and interacted with Continental high society. Responsible masculinity was strengthened as they learned to live away from their families, act maturely, protect themselves from hostile confrontations and theft, and manage the temptations to which they were exposed on a Tour.

Goldsmith's view is that expectations of elite masculinity were situationally bound in the sense that different situations called for different masculinities. This does not mean, however, that in the same situation the conduct of British aristocrats was influenced by only one masculinity. Numerous well-known pastimes in which a high-born man was expected to participate – hunting, shooting, fencing, tennis, and dancing – were measures of both physical skill and a proper aristocratic socialization. Goldsmith calls our attention to the fact that most aristocratic men on a Tour did not actually attend an exclusively military school but an institution that also taught a general aristocratic education.

Similarly, she rejects the notion that dangerous activities were divorced from more refined masculinity. She points out that knowledge of Hannibal's campaigns served as a reference for some aristocrats as they approached the Alps. Geography also served as an opportunity for Grand Tourists to promote themselves as enlightened men of science – though not to the point of engaging in any serious scientific work. While young men who scaled mountains focussed more on what they could see and touch than what they felt, she maintains that they did appreciate these sights as sources of the sublime. And a need to demonstrate

sensibility became more pronounced in the later part of the eighteenth century, though sensibility was never outside aristocratic normative expectations.

All these normative prescriptions were embedded in British aristocratic culture, but Goldsmith cautions against simplistic assumptions about how culture shaped the conduct of young aristocrats. Gender theory, she notes, holds that the construction of gender takes place not just through direct cultural socialization, but also through performance. True, these men were exposed to a steady stream of formal instructions about how to conduct themselves – from their early education to a vast adult literature on correct gentlemanly behaviour. Nevertheless, she insists that in order to understand their behaviour we have to examine their various experiences and the contexts in which these experiences occurred. In particular, to understand the attraction of Tourists to physical challenges and dangers, we need to recognize the influence these young men had on one another. Stories were often told of how other Tourists behaved; and Tourists did not usually travel alone but with a fellow Tourist. They also met other Tourists on their travels. We likewise need to take into account the role played by their families. This is, of course, widely recognized with respect to refined and responsible masculinity. Providing considerable evidence, Goldsmith shows that it was also, to a surprising extent, true of hardy masculinity. Naturally parents worried about their young man on a Tour, and did not want him to act foolishly; they often cautioned him against taking excessive risks. Still, in most cases parents accepted their own anxiety as an unavoidable price they had to pay so that their young man could face the trials posed by a Grand Tour.

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Another theme in this book is how Grand Tourists were concerned about the presentation of their aristocratic masculinity. Letters home, diaries, and other accounts they provided of their travels were usually designed to give just the right image of how they acted under different circumstances. As a result of the multiple masculinities they faced, getting it right was not always easy. Too much emphasis on how great were the risks they took would undermine their claims to responsible masculinity. Too much exuberance in describing their skills and courage would be seen as ungentlemanly boasting. As Goldsmith notes, all this makes it rather difficult to be sure precisely what they did. But for her purposes how Tourists framed their actions is just as important as what they actually did.

Presentation was a constant concern in the status competition in which all aristocrats were engaged in early modern Europe. The Tour was itself meant to separate aristocratic families from those who could not afford the expense of a Grand Tour or spare the time it took in the life of a young man trying to start a career. Attending royal courts and elite educational institutions further enhanced their claim to higher status. They also used the Tour to network among Continental royalty and nobility, to their own benefit and to the benefit of their families. The Tour could also present their hardy masculinity as superior to that of non-aristocrats. Indeed, some Grand Tourists went so far as to contrast how they calmly faced a danger with the inability of the others with whom they were travelling – tutors, servants, or locals – to do so. As Goldsmith says, their behaviour was fundamentally based on a ‘profound and shared sense of hierarchy and social superiority’ (p. 214).

This book does much more than increase our knowledge of the Grand Tour. It obviously makes a contribution to our understanding of masculinity in Europe during the early mod-

ern period. But it also makes a contribution to our understanding of the modernization of European society. It does so by putting another nail in the coffin of the long-standing assumption that this modernization entailed a replacement of an aristocratic culture in which birth predominated over merit by a middle-class culture in which merit predominated over birth. Most readers of this journal are well aware of the problems with this assumption, but it is still commonly found among many writers, both academic and non-academic. It is certainly true that in early modern Europe many opportunities were more or less restricted to persons of aristocratic birth. This does not mean, however, that aristocratic culture did not place a significant value on merit.

First, aristocrats recognized what we can call ‘personal merit’, that is the achievements of some individuals relative to those of other individuals, especially some aristocrats relative to other aristocrats. Thus we routinely find aristocratic men and women extolling the superiority of particular individuals of whom they have knowledge. Goldsmith remarks on the pleasure Grand Tourists felt when they were able to meet famous figures who combined the merits of the various masculinities. Second, European aristocrats believed in ‘merit in the blood’, that is, the superior merit they inherited from their lineage. It was also believed, however, that it was necessary for aristocrats, particularly young men, to convince others and themselves that they carried these merits, not unlike the way Calvinists needed to persuade themselves that they were members of the elect. As Goldsmith emphatically states, honour always had to be earned and defended.

Of course, ideas of what was meritorious differed among social groups. Many of the virtues to which Grand Tourists aspired were shared by middling social groups, such as civility, rationality, and wit. Other virtues were proclaimed more passionately among aristocrats than among non-aristocrats, such as grace, loyalty, daring, courage, and ‘honour’. It is also true that in Europe during the eighteenth century, ideas of what was meritorious changed. This was especially true in the military, primarily as a result of changes in methods of army warfare. Although British aristocrats served militarily in large numbers and took pride in their military service, the British army was slower than Continental armies to adopt these changes, as a result of which the British aristocracy was frequently accused of undervaluing merit. It was a questionable claim. Their wealth enabled them to take advantage of the purchase of commissions, but this system was mostly contrary to the military values of the British aristocracy and was by no means advantageous to all aristocrats. Officer ranks in Continental armies were also composed predominantly of those born into the aristocracy despite their generally superior military training. And, as Goldsmith argues, many British aristocrats, including the very high born, were interested in improving their military competence. What we see in her book is that even a practice often regarded as a last fling for young aristocrats before they took up more serious responsibilities was nevertheless also considered an exercise and test of their merit.

Goldsmith has given us a fine piece of scholarship. It is the product of intensive research, which she has intelligently analysed and skilfully presented. It is worthy of much praise.

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