

**Gillian Williamson, *British Masculinity in the Gentleman's Magazine, 1731 to 1815*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. 283. £63. ISBN 9781137542328.**

For scholars of the long eighteenth century, the *Gentleman's Magazine* is a rich and varied repository of the momentous and the mundane, ranging from the unfolding events of the French Revolution to the use of hedgehogs to tackle a blackbeetle infestation. Gillian Williamson's fascinating book offers a sustained and detailed study of the *Magazine's* readership and its changing ideas of the gentleman, from its foundation by Edward Cave in 1731 to the aftermath of Waterloo in 1815. By this point, Williamson notes, the *Magazine* had become the conservative and somewhat stuffy periodical Hazlitt called 'the last lingering remains of a former age' (2). This conservatism was a product of the 1790s, Williamson argues; in its earlier decades, the *Gentleman's Magazine* had been an aspirational publication for the 'middling sort', in which readers from the mercantile and professional classes fashioned the figure of the gentleman in their own image.

Williamson's longitudinal study is based on a sample of the *Magazine's* content over the period: the sample includes all of the Prefaces to each year's volume, the whole of the January and July numbers for each year, and all of the 21,583 family notices – births, marriages, deaths – from 1731 to 1815. These notices and other readers' contributions – poetry, letters, debates – occupy an increasing proportion of the *Magazine* from the 1750s onwards, offer an extraordinary picture of its demographic and the readership's view of itself.

An opening chapter on eighteenth-century masculinity and its historiography is followed by an account of the *Magazine's* own history over the period 1731 to 1815. Focusing on readers and readership, the third chapter draws on new empirical evidence to consider the *Magazine's* circulation and reception, and its social and geographical range. The remaining three chapters are divided chronologically (1731–56; 1757–89; 1790–1815) and explore developments in gentlemanly masculinity in relation to 'the historiography of crises and turning points' (4). Here, Williamson finds reason to challenge dominant views of significant developments in eighteenth-century history, arguing that the *Magazine* does not bear out the idea of the 1750s as a period of gender panic and that the loss of America seems less of a watershed than the writings of Thomas Paine. Some developments appear earlier than historians have assumed – the British royal family as a model of bourgeois domesticity, for example, or the foundations of Victorian middle-class identity.

A study with this subject and this span is inevitably quite fast-moving, and occasionally frustrating to readers who want to know more about particular examples. Williamson's case studies go some way towards satisfying this desire and show how the *Magazine's* readers wrestled with the relationship between public and private character. John Howard, admired as a prison reformer, was accused of being a cold and neglectful father (though some readers leapt to his defence); much of Nelson's private life had to be omitted from the record to preserve the idea of him as a model hero.

Class and status are central to Williamson's argument. In the *Magazine's* early stages, Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison is a model for the middling sort to imitate as far as they can, while in the 1760s to 1780s the aristocracy provides the villains against whom the virtuous bourgeoisie can define themselves. In the 1790s, Williamson argues, 'the crucial social boundary became that between all those who had some claim to gentlemanly status and the lower orders as objects of surveillance and discipline' (177).

There is more to being a gentleman than masculinity, then, and likewise there is more to masculinity than being a gentleman. At times the fit between the book's title and its contents feels a little strained. Perhaps oddly, given its place in a series entitled *Genders and Sexualities in History*, the book ignores the work of queer scholars on masculinity in this

period (Thomas A. King's *The Gendering of Men 1600–1750* is the most obvious omission) and equates masculinity with heterosexuality. However normative the *Magazine* might be in its aims, it still found room for striking oddities and instances of gender nonconformity in some of the issues Williamson has sampled, although she does not mention them: the female husband at Poplar whose story appears in July 1766, for example, and who on being discovered “put off the male and put on the female character”, a phrase that suggests a remarkably provisional and performative model of gender and character; or the scandalous case of Captain Robert Jones, whose trial for an “unnatural assault” on a teenage apprentice boy was reported in July 1772; or the celebrated cross-dressing Chevalier d’Eon, whose sex became the subject of a trial reported in July 1777. These stories, and others like them, are also part of the rich and strange history of masculinity and its construction in this period, including in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*.

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