



Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America

Thomas Foster

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With few exceptions, sex is noticeably absent from popular histories chronicling colonial and Revolutionary America. Moreover, it is rarely associated specifically with early American men. This is in part because sex and family have traditionally been associated with women, while politics and business are the historic province of men. But Thomas Foster turns this conventional view on its head. Through the use of court records, newspapers, sermons, and private papers from Massachusetts, he vividly shows that sex—the behaviors, desires, and identities associated with eroticism —was a critical component of colonial understanding of the qualities considered befitting for a man.

Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man begins by examining how men, as heads of households, held ultimate responsibility for sex—not only within their own marriages but also for the sexual behaviors of dependents and members of their households. Foster then examines the ways sex solidified bonds in the community, including commercial ties among men, and how sex operated in courtship and social relations with women. Starkly challenging current views about the development of sexuality in America, the book details early understandings of sexual identity and locates a surprising number of stereotypes until now believed to have originated a century later, among them the black rapist and the unmanly sodomite, figures that serve to reinforce cultural norms of white male heterosexuality.

As this engrossing and surprising study shows, we cannot understand manliness today or in our early American past without coming to terms with the oft-hidden relationship between sex and masculinity.

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