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Bonnie Mann, *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 256 pp., \$29.95 US (pbk), 9780199981656.

Sovereign Masculinity challenges its readers to consider the complex ways in which US statehood is inextricably bound with hegemonic masculinity. Bonnie Mann leads the reader on a fascinating journey through her original philosophical reflections, informed by gender studies, on the war on terror. The book opens with a powerful narrative from a young Iraqi man who had been detained by US forces. Dhia al-Shweiri recalled how he felt his manhood had been “shatter[ed]” and he was made to “feel like a woman” (ix).¹ There is much to be made of this statement and as I was reading my mind moved through various avenues such as the cultural divide embedded in his words between ‘the East and the West,’ and how it intersects with the postcolonial gendered body. The multiple layers of critical thought with which Mann opens this book are superb. The reader is pushed to consider how these are related to global politics in general and US politics in particular. For instance, how does a Westerner understand al-Shweiri’s statements? If war is an act of sovereign power, then are these statements to be understood as ‘victory’? It is the emotional and psychological construction of these and other gendered expressions in the context of the so-called ‘war on terror’ that Mann critically explores and questions.

In Chapter 1, Mann opens with an ontological discussion of gender. “Gender is substantive in the sense that, at least for some of us, it constitutes such a core structure of the self, and of the self-world relation—its undoing is the self’s undoing. When gender is shattered, al-Shweiri tells us, the person is broken, a world is lost” (1). For Mann, then, gender has “‘ontological weight’ in the lived experience of the subject, and any feminist account must contend with this reality” (1). By extension she wants to understand the United States’ vision of empire through understanding its culture and practices of gender. She clarifies this assertion using what she calls ‘political phenomenology,’ which seeks to understand politics or political systems while also appreciating individual experience. Consequently, Mann urges us to pay “attention to gender as it is lived,” which, according to her, will reveal that “feminist thinking and practice remain as excruciatingly relevant today as they were forty years ago” (10). But before she proceeds, Mann distinguishes her work from

¹ This account is cited from an interview conducted by Scheherezade Faramarzi, “Former Prisoner Prefers Saddam’s Torture to US Abuse,” *CommonDreams.org*, May 3, 2004.

Jasbir Puar's seminal study, *Terrorist Assemblages*.² Mann's work firmly locates itself in feminist inquiry and her critique of Puar is that she dealt with feminism as "doubly outmoded" (10). I think this is a significant distinction given that Puar's work encompasses many of the critical concepts that Mann highlights in her book. Nevertheless, while the two books may differ in their theoretical framing, they point toward the same issues in current global politics. In the end, Mann situates her study more along the lines of the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: "Beauvoir initiates a politicization of phenomenological inquiry that makes it capable of dealing with complex political phenomena and individual passions at the same time—as well as their relation to one another; this is precisely what is needed for the inquiry I've undertaken" (11). This is useful in a world where state and party politics tend to alienate or ignore individuality.

In Chapter 4, Mann embarks on a historical journey of masculinity within the US, declaring, "manhood has a history" (48). This helps the reader understand how masculinity is constructed in a given political state. In particular, she highlights the impact of the televisual on militarized manhood. For instance, she provides a detailed and insightful analysis of the character William James in the 2008 movie *The Hurt Locker*. These powerful images and narratives play an essential role in US political masculinities, she argues. The various ways in which the military uses gendered notions in order to strengthen their resolve clearly has a history in US film and media. But Mann argues that movies such as this, in fact, depict a form of masculinity that, while helpful in shaping the imagination of Americans in support of military conquests, is untenable or even self-destructive on the actual battlefield. The moral and ethical implications of these depictions, in her view, are (self-)destructive and self-defeating. Here Mann's work moves beyond mere scholarly interest and takes on the tone of an activist seeking real change.

This leads her into further discussions about the connection between these militaristic constructions of masculinity and intellectualism. Mann critically examines the historical development within male-dominated intellectual circles of the notion that men are rational and intelligent, and are thus better equipped for military situations than are women. These culturally infused gender constructions are problematic for Mann. This leads us to Chapter 6 where she states that, "in order to be a woman or a man, one becomes one. When we understand the verb of this sentence as the key to its meaning, we see that each subject assumes the situation presented to her, some aspects of which are strictly individual, some aspects of which are broadly cultural/social, *in her own way*" (83, emphasis added). According to Mann, then, on one level society and culture strengthen these insular gender stereotypes and male hegemony, but on another level, the opposite, in fact, is true. This just goes to show how strong a hold stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity have on society and institutions.

In Chapter 7, Mann discusses the term 'woman,' which Dhia al-Shweiri used as somewhat of a slur. Mann responds thusly, "These meanings are never in our individual control, since gendered stylization extends into the social world and establishes for itself a life in the social imaginary of a people. Gender holds us in our social worlds in profoundly significant ways which we do not choose" (93). She continues, in Chapter 8, by exploring ideas of the imaginary: "what is clear is that the fear of feeling like a woman has an extremely vibrant life in the imaginary domain. By using this term I am, of course, placing myself in the context of a complicated history. Philosophical accounts of the imaginary, and the mysteriously unrelated accounts of the imagination, abound" (99). In other words, Mann is

² Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

describing the causal relation between the imagination and reality—as best exemplified by how the fairytale princess depicted in Disney movies over and over again continues to play an essential role in the construction of gender in society.

Chapter 9 explores the relationship between gender, shame, and sovereign manhood. As Mann writes, “[S]overeign manhood stands on the precarious edge of shame. It must paradoxically remain in the presence of shame, because shame is what is converted to power in its self-constituting practice. When sovereign manhood has established itself against the experience of shame, shame and its production became the necessary motor for the realization of its power” (116). Hence, in the following chapter, Mann goes on to question the possibility of the ‘redemption’ of shame and its transformation to power. How does the gendered body move from being a site of shame to a site of power? If individual masculinity is in crisis, how does that male body move to power?

According to Mann, ontologically speaking, “there will be no equality for women as long as the imagined fraternity of men structures the world of the soldier” (148). And this ontology is inscribed within language. For instance, in Chapter 12, Mann describes the way US soldiers’ vernacular connects their militarism with the gendered norms of ‘home’: “trash talk, for the male soldier, then, is a manner of self-soothing—it brings him home in language. For the female soldier, it is a desperate attempt to belong, to find a location somewhere above the very bottom place where one’s humanity is no longer intelligible to others, where one’s injurability is celebrated, where one’s servility, penetrability, and dispensability is ritualistically evoked” (154). Similarly, in Chapter 13, Mann explicates the construction of the ‘father’ and how it is invoked to protect ‘women.’ She gives the example of Obama humorously warning the Jonas Brothers that he knew that his daughters Sasha and Malia were fans and so they needed to remember two words: “predator drones” (156). Once again, Mann pushes the reader to consider the way in which statements such as these connect familial heterosexual gender roles, militaristic masculinity, and global politics. Even the jingoism, “shock and awe,” operates in accord with these gendered, identitarian associations: “It needs to have its citizens read the headlines, ‘Shock and Awe,’ and feel their most visceral identity commitments expressed in the hyperbolic display of agency, the spectacle of invulnerability, that the headline announces” (181).

Returning to the theme introduced through the testimony given by al-Shweiri in her Introduction, in Chapter 16 Mann examines the connection between torture and sex. “By shattering the manhood of the purported ‘enemy,’” torture “produces the manhood of the nation” (198). In response to the ongoing maltreatment of prisoners of war that simultaneously oppresses women, Mann quite superbly unifies the academic–activist divide by declaring: “we have to attend to the *modes of production* of national manhood, to the *justificatory operations* it enables. It is not the task of feminism to merely describe and understand these operations but to disrupt them” (213).

This book is a must read for those who want to understand the complexity and nuance of sovereign masculinity. One thing is clear: gender is inseparable from discussions surrounding US military interventions and the so-called war on terror. This complexity is no different from what one would find in any part of the world, including the Muslim world. While Mann’s work is focused on the US experience, I was left thinking about the many ways that it intersects with issues that I think about every day as an Islamicist. There is a lot of heart in this book, and I am a little envious of the way in which Mann mixes the scholarly with her passionate activism. It is just the kind of book that is sorely needed in a badly broken world. Mann has left me with a whole host of questions, as well as provided me with invaluable points of critical clarification, inspiration, and, definitely, a gender lesson.

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