

Undergraduate Research Symposium May 17, 2013 Mary Gates Hall

Online Proceedings

SESSION 2F

THE POETICS OF PARANOIA: USING LANGUAGE TO IMAGINE THE CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERENCE

Session Moderator: Phillip Thurtle, *Comparative History of Ideas*

238 MGH

3:45 PM to 5:15 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

”But Will I Be a Man?” The Masculinity Strategy in Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke

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Mentor: Juliet Shields, *English*

Many have demonstrated that Edmund Burke and other male writers contributed to, if not constructed, a gender binary in which males perpetually subdue and dominate the feminine. For instance, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Mary Wollstonecraft deconstructs passages from Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution*, demonstrating that his ideal world is one in which sublime, masculine authority usurps the rights of women. For Wollstonecraft, Burke’s efforts to counter revolutionary ideas are of no benefit to women. While these readings are certainly valid, some scholars have expressed the concern that in limiting our understanding of masculinity to its being a fixed institution determined to maintain power over women, we are grossly oversimplifying individual as well as collective masculine experience(s). Thus, I hope for this project to contribute to a more complex portrait of masculinity particularly in the late 18th century. Limiting my discussion to Burke’s *Reflections* and Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, I argue that however much these two literary works convey opposing ideologies, elements of their rhetorical strategy reveals that both writers understood that the success of their arguments largely depended on how effectively they controlled the semantic value of manliness. In order to *provoke* revolution, Paine seeks to assure his readers that engaging in revolution is an indisputable reflection of manhood. But unlike Paine, Burke wrote in order to *prevent* revolution. In the *Reflections*, Burke argues that the failure to sustain the pre-established order would result in the failure to retain masculinity. Ultimately, that Paine and Burke

fought to control the meaning of manhood suggests masculinity was a loosely defined social institution—one consisting of males who lived in perpetual fear of losing, or failing to perform their masculinity; who were ever in need of affirmation that they were, indeed, men.