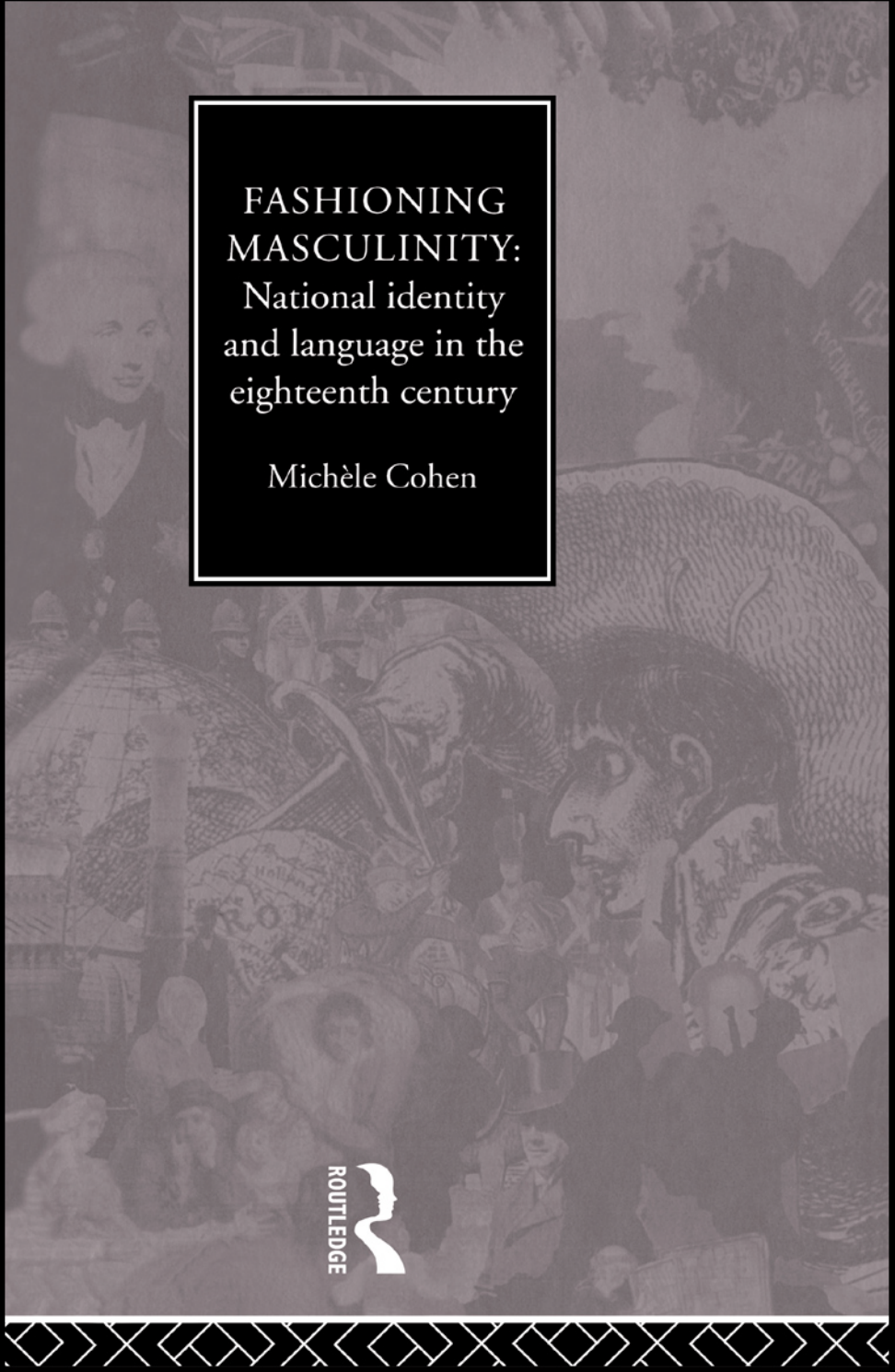

FASHIONING MASCULINITY: National identity and language in the eighteenth century

Michèle Cohen

ROUTLEDGE

FASHIONING MASCULINITY

'Original, thought-provoking, and argued with tremendous rigor and clarity'

John Brewer, *European University Institute*

The fashioning of English gentlemen in the eighteenth century was modelled on French practices of sociability and conversation. Michèle Cohen shows how, at the same time, the English constructed their cultural relations with the French as relations of seduction and desire. She argues that this produced anxiety on the part of the English over the effect of French practices on English masculinity and the virtue of English women.

By the end of the century, representing the French as an effeminate other was integral to the forging of English, masculine, national identity. Michèle Cohen examines the derogation of women and the French which accompanied the emergent 'masculine' English identity. While taciturnity became emblematic of the English gentleman's depth of mind and masculinity, sprightly conversation was seen as representing the shallow and inferior intellect of English women and the French of both sexes.

Michèle Cohen also demonstrates how visible evidence of girls' verbal and language learning skills served only to construe the female mind as inferior. She argues that this perception still has currency today.

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For my son Daniel

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PREFACE

On 6 May 1994, Queen Elizabeth II of England and President François Mitterand of France officially inaugurated the Channel Tunnel. For Britain, this momentous event ended centuries of insularity from the Continent, an insularity that implied protection and proud difference. Symbolically, to 'mark the official joining of England and France', two newspapers, *The Guardian* and *Libération* exchanged format and layout for the day. The features advertised in *The Guardian* were practical, if conventional: 'fares, phobias and food'.[1] Having recently heard on BBC Radio 4 that only 4 per cent of English people speak French, I was struck by the absence of any mention of practicalities relating to the French *language,* except for one. This was an article entitled 'Thomas the trans-Europe TGV seeks superman—or woman' describing the search for drivers for the 'Eurostar Trans-Manche Super Train'. As only experienced drivers could apply, the sole criterion for selection was the candidates' language learning aptitude, something the European Passenger Services company took seriously enough to commission its own 'tailor-made, 600 hour, multi-media language learning pack—aptly called En Train de Parler'. But it is the following comment that caught my attention.

> Staff who joined British Rail simply to drive trains and who had never envisaged learning *another language* have shown great enthusiasm, motivation and proficiency in learning French…'Our drivers have shown that the old cliché that the British can't learn foreign languages simply is not true', concluded Kate Pearce, project manager of languages at European Passenger Services.[2]

This excerpt should raise a few eyebrows, although it probably also confirms popular prejudices about language learning in England. Since the study of one foreign language is compulsory in English secondary schools and French is commonly that one, had not these British drivers been exposed to *some* French already?[3] Of most interest, however, was Ms Pearce's conclusion that since drivers had been successful, enthusiastic and motivated language learners, 'the old cliché that the British *can't* learn foreign languages simply is not true'. How can the (in)ability to learn foreign languages, an individual psycholinguistic trait,[4] be said to be a *national* characteristic?[5] And how can a trait be said to be 'national' when it describes mostly the male section of the population, not the female?

Recent figures reveal that at least twice as many girls as boys take French at school in England, a situation that has worried the modern language establishment for a number of years. Among the reasons adduced to explain why boys don't take French, one recurs: boys perceive French to be a 'girls' subject', a 'female' language.[6] This was particularly intriguing to me, a French national. It had never occurred to me that my native tongue might have a gender. But the gender of French is not just a linguistic or academic curiosity, the product of a national quirk. It has serious implications not only for language classrooms today but, ultimately, for relations between England and France, as the 'linguistically challenged' English stand poised on Europe's doorstep.

When was the statement that French is a female language made, and why was it made at all? When I started researching this question, I expected it would lead me to investigate the historical construction of femininity. But no. Tracing the emergence of the notion that French is a female language led me to explore not femininity, but the fashioning of the *gentleman* in eighteenth-century England, and the role of representations of French manners and language in the formation of an English masculine national identity.

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TEXTUAL NOTE

All French texts quoted in the text have been translated by me.
All French spellings have been modernized.

INTRODUCTION

THE ENGLISH TONGUE

This book is about the construction of the gentleman. 'Self-fashioning', Stephen Greenblatt has noted, 'is always…in language'.[7] Language, defined not as an abstract but as an historically specific system 'through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organised', is central to the construction of subjectivity.[8] However, when the connection between linguistic practice and identity is discussed, the language concerned is usually the mother tongue.

In this study I explore how the play of tongues—English, French and Latin—was implicated in the shaping of the English gentleman.[9] The following chapters will trace why cultivation of the tongue was essential to politeness and to the construction of the gentleman, and why tongues (languages) and the tongue (of the speaking subject) came to be critical sites for the representation, articulation and production of national and gender identities. My use of the word 'tongue' is deliberate. My intent is to impart to my text the eighteenth-century slippage between the tongue as language and the tongue as organ of speech, a slippage central to the belief that language and national character were indissolubly linked.[10]

The tongue, then, was pivotal throughout the eighteenth century. Yet, it is hard to find the word in nineteenth-century discourses, even those relating to conversation—this is still true today.[11] Why is it that whereas both Italian and French have retained the term *lingua* and *langue* to refer both to their national language and to the organ of speech, this usage has virtually disappeared in English?[12] In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, tongue and language were synonymous and

used interchangeably. Johnson defined 'tongue' as 'a nation distinguished by their language', and explained his attitude to change in language with the comment that 'tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration'.[13] At the same time, the tongue was also that 'slippery member' which both men and women found difficult to control, and caution was often made that it should not be loosed, lest it wreak havoc. But it was also reckoned to be the 'glory of man'.[14] The English (the Americans perhaps as well) now have an ambivalent relation to the tongue and the very use of the word is uncomfortable. Could this be a consequence of the association not only between tongues and women but between the tongue and effeminacy? Since the more abstract 'language' has become the dominant term, the tongue is inescapably embedded in its materiality, with all the ambiguities—especially sexual—this entails. It is perhaps no coincidence that the essays I found addressing the tongue and its ambiguities consider mainly *women's* tongues.[15]

A major eighteenth-century preoccupation was the concern over the regulation of the English language.[16] This concern was rooted in part in the belief that whereas Italian and French had long been regulated and fixed by their academies, English, 'neglected…by *English* grammarians', was 'without order' and 'without rules'. And while it was generally felt, as Thomas Wilson put it in 1729, that 'a good language' was an 'Honour' to a nation and 'an unimproved Tongue' a 'Mark either of carelessness or a low Genius of the People', the English alone, complained Sheridan in 1781, had 'left theirs to the power of chance and caprice'.[17]

The concern over the English tongue involved not only the language that the gentleman was supposed to speak,[18] but the speaker himself. The English gentleman's tongue was implicated, from the late seventeenth century in 'The rise of politeness', because fluent and polished discourse was a fundamental condition of politeness, and conversation, as Lawrence Klein has put it, its 'master metaphor'.[19] The art of conversation, treatises and manuals on the subject stressed again and again, was premised on the discipline and cultivation of the tongue.[20] One way to achieve the necessary polish was to converse with women. Another was the Grand Tour, which provided the opportunity for young men of rank not just to perfect their French accent but to polish their

conversation in the company of the French, whose refined language and brilliant conversational skills the English admired—though not always unequivocally.

The French tongue was held to be soft, harmonious and elegant, and the 'vivacity' of discourse the French displayed deemed very pleasing.[21] However, as Addison observed, that 'light talkative humour' had not a little 'infected their tongue'; John Andrews, at the end of the century, was more caustic: French may be elegant and refined but it had 'lost in strength what it had gained in politeness'. And if it was a language 'most admirably calculated to express verbal civilities', these '"unmeaning terms"' just made people 'substitute politeness in the place of truth.'[22] Strength and sincerity, on the other hand, were the distinguishing characteristics of the English tongue. And although practices of sociability central to the fashioning of the English gentleman required the mastery of verbal arts evinced by the French, not only was the monosyllabic English tongue lacking in polish but the English as a nation were said to 'delight in Silence'.[23]

How did these major obstacles to the achievement of polite conversation come to be, by the end of the eighteenth century, the building blocks, so to speak, not only of the national character, but of its masculinity? How did the English come to value their blunt but 'sincere and manly' language? Why did the reticent tongue of the Englishman stand as the testimony of his depth of mind, while their sprightly conversation represented the shallow and inferior intellect of English women and of the French of both sexes? How did conversation, central to the shaping of the gentleman for a century, get to be relegated to a frivolous and mainly female social accomplishment while taciturnity became emblematic of English masculinity? And why, finally, did it become a matter of pride *not* to *speak* foreign languages? By the early twentieth century, the typical English gentleman was one who

> declares, with a tone savouring of pride and disdain, that the sounds of [French] have no interest for him, w ho skips every chapter on pronunciation…[but who] will blush with shame if he so much as omits to dot an *i* when writing the language of which he claims to be master.[24]

The trajectory of the tongue since the early eighteenth century frames the story I tell in this book, and the tongue is a main character in that story.

CONVERSATION AND POLITENESS

The mutual conversation of the sexes, it was generally agreed, was the best way to achieve politeness. As Addison put it, it is 'the Male that gives Charms to Womankind, that produces an Air in their Faces, a Grace in their Motions, a Softness in their Voices, and a Delicacy in their Compactions'. Without women,

> Men would be quite different creatures from what they are at present; their Endeavours to please the opposite Sex, polishes and refines them out of those Manners most natural to them…Man would not only be an unhappy, but a rude unfinished Creature, were he conversant with none but those of his own Make.[25]

The conviction that conversation between men and women 'improved' and refined them both was so abiding that by the end of the century, it had become a virtual commonplace that 'free communication between the sexes' was an index of the refinement and polish of a nation.[26]

Polite society, the most civilized type of society was, however, fraught with danger. While mixed social intercourse and conversation were indispensable to the fashioning of the gentleman, they were, paradoxically, also the site for the greatest anxiety. 'Refinement should only go so far or it would become effeminacy', Shaftesbury had declared early in the century, and Joseph Spence, writing in the 1730s, cautioned that 'some conversation with the ladies is necessary to smooth the temper as well as the manners of men, but too much of it is apt to effeminate or debilitate both'.[27] If the presence of men made women more feminine, women, in polishing men out of rude nature, did not necessarily make them more *manly.* The question that exercised moralists, essayists and educationists alike throughout the century was whether the distinction between 'manly politeness and luxurious effeminacy' could be sustained.[28]

It would appear that for Shaftesbury and Spence, the difference between them was principally a matter of 'excess'.

With its connotations of luxury and self-indulgence, excess was in total contrast to frugality, simplicity and self-discipline, characteristics of the virtuous citizen imagined by classical republicanism, what John Barrell has called 'the most authoritative fantasy of masculinity in early eighteenth-century Britain'.[29] Excess positioned the gentleman as effeminate, 'self-control' positioned him as manly.[30] Even an article of apparel like the wig could denote status and 'masculine authority' and at the same time pose 'the threat of excess and…effeminacy'. The 'dilemma of masculinity' is aptly summarized by Marcia Pointon. While the 'artificial covering of the head' was required as a sign of 'virility, station and decency', it was 'simultaneously threatened by the connotations—religious, moral and sexual—of the only item that could secure that signification'.[31] But how much constituted 'excess'? And how could effeminacy be found in 'excess' and at the same time, be conceived of as not 'enough' manliness?[32] What was meant by 'effeminacy'?

It could be said that in many ways, the discursive domains of effeminacy mirrored those which John Sekora identified for 'the greatest single social issue and the greatest single commonplace' in the eighteenth century: luxury.[33] Often either conflated with luxury or held to be its inevitable consequence,[34] the effects of effeminacy, like those of luxury, ranged from the individual to the nation, from 'an index of human sinfulness' to 'sapping a nation's economic and military strength'.[35] The pervasiveness of the concept as well as its ambiguities and shifts are also highlighted by George Barker-Benfield, one of the first historians to focus specifically on 'The Question of Effeminacy' in the eighteenth century.[36] But there is one major difference between luxury and effeminacy, a difference signalled by Sekora's own silence about effeminacy despite its insistent presence in the texts he cites. Whereas the multiple meanings of luxury in the eighteenth century 'bedevil modern students',[37] effeminacy tends to be treated with the casualness usually bred from familiarity. Its present meanings are assimilated to those of the past, it has no historicity, no strangeness, it is taken for granted. We all 'know' what effeminacy means and what it has always meant. But do we?

For G.S.Rousseau, effeminacy is unambiguously associated with homosexual tendencies; for Randolph Trumbach, it refers to the 'exclusive sodomite'.[38] Effeminacy is also associated with

femininity, as when literary historian Harriet Guest for example, reads the statement '*Obscenity* itself is grown effeminate' to mean that 'the display of femininity has become obscene'.[39] On the other hand, Kathleen Wilson has shown how crucial a notion of 'effeminacy' was to arguments about the imperial project and the definition of the British nation in the eighteenth century. 'Effeminacy', she argues, 'denoted a degenerate moral, political and social state that opposed and subverted the vaunted "manly" characteristics—courage, aggression, martial valour, strength— constituting patriotic virtue.' But she also points out that while the empire 'cultivated and bolstered "manly characteristics"', it could paradoxically also foster 'an insidious and "effeminate" luxuriousness and corruption'.[40]

There is an expanding literature on effeminacy in the early modern period, and it is not my aim to get into debates about the emergence of a homosexual culture in eighteenth-century England, nor to deny that effeminacy might refer to homosexuality or to femininity. But I want to resist the attempts to make 'effeminacy' coherent and unitary by reducing it to gender, to sex or to politics. Its very ambiguity, its contradictions even, are, as Michel Foucault would say, evidence of its historicity.[41] Thus, while John Brown asserted, in 1757, that 'the true Character of the Present Times is that of a vain *luxurious,* and *selfish* Effeminacy', that an effeminate nation is 'A Nation which *resembles Women',* and that the French too were 'effeminate and vain', he also argued that they were 'brave', 'honourable', 'warlike' and, 'Heroes in the Field'.[42]

In this study, I am concerned with two expressions of effeminacy in the eighteenth century. One relates to anxieties about the effects of French seductiveness upon the English nation, the other, to anxieties about the tongue.

EFFEMINACY AND FRENCH SEDUCTION

It was not just the 'rampant Francophilia' of the upper ranks[43] and their desire for imported luxury goods that was cause for concern. For James Burgh, the danger represented by the French for *all* ranks was *'bewitching* Pleasure', not only irresistible, but unnatural, ungodly, even. It was because this enchantment produced 'inordinate and exhorbitant desires'[44] that the English became 'other', effeminated—excess is precisely the site of