

Youth

How differently did men and women experience youth in early modern Europe? Were young men allowed to run amok? Or does it only seem that way, reading the complaints of their betters?

Word Count (excluding quotes): 2,007

In early modern Europe, as few people could expect to live past the age of forty, adolescence and youth represented a significant proportion of an individual's life. In addressing how differently men and women experienced youth and whether the young men were allowed to run amok we must examine modern Europe's youth across rural societies, both the laboring class and the upper class, and across urban societies specifically the urban underworld.

In the early modern period there was little or no education for the laboring poor, especially in the rural areas. From a young age of adolescence young men and women tended to go into service with other families as domestic servants, pauper apprentices or the largest numerical group, servants in husbandry. The other main type of service at this time was as an apprentice to a craftsman.

When a youth went into the workforce, in the majority of cases it meant they left the family home or village and met new people, both other youths and adults. It also meant that the youth had responsibilities to his or her family and to their employer which came with independence from the fact that the youth was earning a wage. Parents often relied on the money of older children in order to keep the family going.

When an adolescent left the parental home and went into service there were obviously constraints on behaviour due to the fact that the child had moved into his or her employer's home. However there was more chance of meeting the opposite sex in an environment of limited adult supervision, more of an opportunity to 'run amok'.

Mixing with the opposite sex was and still is a vital part of the socialisation of children, however in the situation of service, on a farm for instance, there was a not inconsiderable chance of sexual experimentation.

Kussmaul writes of the case of Margaret Bull, who was a servant in Staffordshire. She gave birth to an illegitimate child, whose father lived next door to the house of her master. Kussmaul also quotes figures presented by Keith Wrightson from Essex in the seventeenth century, where 61% of mothers of children born out of wedlock were servants and 52% of the fathers resided within the same household.¹ These figures tell us a great deal, we can see that many adolescents used the relative freedom of service to experiment sexually, it was not however restricted to the males.

The employer would have a great deal of influence on the life of his young employee. Often the children of the employer were of a similar age as the servants and the 1549 Book of Common Prayer² made it the duty of the head of the household to ensure the religious upbringing of all children under his care, even the servants. This shows that the employer had to look beyond the fact that the servants merely worked for him and try to have a part in the upbringing of the child. However farmers were not always considerate to their employees and often had a bad opinion of them as Kussmaul describes, quoting a farmer by the name of Nourse who said:

*"there was not a more insolent and proud, a more untractable, perfidious and a more churlish sort of people breathing, than the generality of our servants"*³

Despite its pitfalls, this vocation led to a certain improvement in equality between males and females. Females especially were given greater motivation and control over avoiding 'running amok'.

Participation along with men in the institution of household service, for example, ensured considerable mobility for women and men alike as well as women's greater say in their own matrimonial decisions. While it is true that such independence also made most

¹ A. Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in early modern England*, (Cambridge, 1981), pg 12

² The First book of the common prayer: <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/162.html>

³ Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, p14.

women more vulnerable to rape and seduction than the more protected daughters of the upper classes, it also encouraged the development of women's own sense of individual responsibility, in financial as well as sexual matters.

Typically, women as well as men were required to amass their own savings in preparation for marriage and the establishment of a separate household. They therefore had particular motivation to prevent a pregnancy that might entail impossible burdens of support and compromise their marriageability.

When a suitor attempted to persuade Alice Wheeler, for example, that she should have sexual relations with him on the grounds that they were already contracted to marry, Wheeler responded tartly,

*"I know ... that I am your wife and you my husband, yet until such time as we are married [in church] you shall not have the use of my body"*⁴

Urban Apprentices of the labouring class did not have the same freedom as those that entered the service. Almost without exception, exclusively a male occupation, they led a very restricted life. They were highly regulated and in addition to having a seven year training period, were subject to many rules.

They were not allowed to drink, obliged to attend church, not allowed to fornicate and had to wait until at least the age of twenty-four to get married. This was understandable, it can be argued, from the point of view of the craftsmen that were teaching the apprentices because it was an investment for a great period of time rather than a single year long contract as it would be with the rural servants.

So this all meant that there was less chance of an apprentice meeting a prospective marriage partner. On the whole, it can be argued, the constraints placed upon the apprentices were detrimental to their socialisation and development into adults because they were not allowed to mix to the same extent with other people, socially because they were not allowed to drink alcohol and because they were restricted from interaction with

⁴ Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England: 1550-1720*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.121

the opposite sex. They certainly could not 'run amok' and arguably their female counterparts would be enjoying a much more liberal experience of youth.

The higher the social level, the more rigid divisions between womens and mens experience of youth. Men were expected to interact, travel and invlolve himself with attaining a vocation. Women were therefore often left together, even after marriage, and thus shared very different experiences of youth from the males'.

Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford succeed in showing that, there existed an identifiable female culture or "system of shared meanings", within which women lived their lives.

"This culture featured not only the common tasks women performed--everything from childrearing to needlework and cookery--but also the shared practices of piety as well as a deepening of female friendships in contexts where women came to rely increasingly on neighbors rather than kin for support".⁵

Mary Elizabeth Perry gives a different perspective on the youth experience of early modern Europe in her book *Crime and Society in Early Modern Seville*. This book focuses on the youth that roamed the streets of Seville in Early Modern Europe. Perry claims that it is difficult to find a dividing line between childhood and adulthood for the young men as there was no period of parental childhood and guidance.

These urban males could be labeled as running amok judging by their delinquent behavior. It was however, by necessity. The young male street hawker had to be as adroit as the adult retail bandit in finding food for himself. Perry claims the best way to distinguish between childhood and adulthood in the underworld may be to examine the attitudes of the larger community. To city fathers, the youth on the streets were a

⁵ Mendelson, *Women in Early Modern England*, p.131

nuisance that they could sometimes use profitably; ragged and hungry, they were often to be pitied.

As a youth grew through adolescence, however, he grew as a threat. Several factors may help to explain why street youths appeared so threatening. In the first place, they had become accomplished in criminal skills. Most of them had survived a childhood of the streets. They were experienced in theft and cheating, and they had already learned an underworld attitude of cynical exploitation. In addition, they were more physically able to carry out violence. A child had less choice of violent weapons, and less strength to use them. He could be overwhelmed more easily than an older youth.

Perry goes on to explain that the youth could challenge adult authority, for it presented a sexual rivalry. The merchant who brushed aside the small boys in the street felt a much greater irritation about the brash, idle young men who hung around the city brothels. This merchant would usually have to deal with these young toughs in groups, for the youth loves to act collectively in breaking adult taboos.⁶

On the other hand, adult hypocrites who, themselves, broke taboos were the targets for groups of gleeful young people. The young toughs who swaggered down the streets of Seville moved together. They laughed uproariously at their own jokes, raucously insulted older citizens, and collectively bumped into adults whose position they were challenging, both literally and figuratively.⁷

These idle young men tended not to fit into the mold that city fathers had prepared for them. They disdained the jobs that were available in the city, refusing to load and unload ships or even to train to become ships' pilots. They would not work as low-paid agricultural laborers, nor would they become well-mannered servants and lackeys for local aristocrats.

⁶ Mary Elizabeth Perry, "Crime and society in early modern Seville," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, (1981) pg. 210.

⁷ M. Perry, *Crime and society*, pg. 211

According to Perry, these young people had become so jaded that churchmen and city officials could no longer hope to convert them into good citizens. Why waste time trying to train youths who were already hardcore thieves, dishonest and opportunistic cynics? These young hoods were more useful in killing one another off, filling military quotas, or justifying a hard line on law and order, a persuasive argument for stringent enforcement of curfew laws and regulations against carrying weapons.

This account portrays the men, particularly from the inner cities as young criminals that were indeed allowed to run amok. However this misbehavior of the youth of early modern Europe does not suggest they were required to conform before they had matured and were simply deeply unfulfilled and disheartened with their lot in life, a now accepted and tolerated attribute of the trial of any youth.

Mary Elizabeth Perry comments on the women too in her account of the youths of Seville in Early modern Europe. Perry suggests churchmen and city leaders were also aware of the women in the underworld. They heard the raucous voices of the women who hawked wares in the streets. They saw the coarse manners of women who kept inns, and they watched the colorful actresses and singers.

All of these women, they assumed, were prostitutes, or "lost women."⁸ This euphemism that city fathers used suggests that the women were outcasts who had completely lost their way in the dominant culture of the city; but historical evidence shows that "lost women" were an integral part of their community, just as prostitutes are in present-day society. They supported themselves, their children, and a vast network of pimps, procuresses, and entrepreneurs. Pushed by the socioeconomic disruptions of the period, they easily crossed the invisible line between respectable society and the underworld. Their lives demonstrate how the underworld culture renewed and preserved itself in a city ruled by men who loudly proclaimed the evils of the underworld. Thus it can be seen the women too 'ran amok' but served a more intrinsic and productive role within the urban society

⁸M. Perry, *Crime and society*, pg. 212

In conclusion, the experience of youth across men and women in early modern Europe differed greatly or very little depending on the social circumstance. Those of the rural laboring classes involved in the service found very similar experiences of youth. The women in these situations by the nature of their lifestyles found they had more freedom and control thus the sexes ran equally amok. Those males of the apprentice vocation within the laboring class found they had absolutely no opportunity to run amok. As you climb further up the social classes you find further disparity across the youth experiences of males and females. The men of this class had more financial and social freedom and thus more opportunity for behaving as any young person should, getting out and experiencing the world i.e. running amok.

Superficially, the social class that ran amok in the greatest sense was that of the urban underworld where both males and females engaged in unattractive activities. Upon closer inspection however we see these people, especially the women are taking on responsibilities and living up to them at a young age, living out intricate social hierarchies dependent on their behavior.

Overall we can say that there were differences across males and female depending on social situations and whether men were allowed to run amok is subjective but would appear that by today's standard, no more than usual.