



# Proving Manhood: Reflections on Men and Sexism (Men and Masculinity)

*Timothy Beneke*

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Is male chauvinism a natural byproduct of American masculinity, or does it reflect a deeper pain and fear at the heart of gender relations? With sensitivity and honesty, Timothy Beneke, author of *Men on Rape*, frames the issue of sexism as a problem of masculinity, one deeply rooted in cultural ideals of manhood and forever opposed to the feminine. Men are required to "prove" their masculinity daily from childhood on. They are forced to endure situations of stress and distress that demonstrate their strength and unflappable endurance. In rituals such as sports, sex, and work, men constantly invent and renew their masculine identities as they learn to repress and reject all "feminized" behavior. Pornography, homophobia, and the morning sports section become crucial "proving grounds" where masculinity is tested and asserted.

Beneke argues that men demonstrate the attitudes that underlie sexism in the psychically related practices of reading the sports page and pornographic magazines. In both, men can test their manhood vicariously. Following the lives and careers of athletes religiously in the sports pages, men celebrate and identify with the physical endurance and strength that is at the core of the masculine ideal from the safety of their living rooms. Gazing at languishing nudes in *Playboy*, men similarly identify with an ideal of masculine prowess and superiority safe from any threatening manifestations of female sexuality. Beneke negotiates the minefield of sexual politics with intelligence and skill. He draws extensively on his experience as an anti-rape activist to understand the roots of male aggression. With personal anecdotes of hero-worship and guilt over his own struggle with latent sexism, Beneke incorporates a thought-provoking self critique into this unique study of modern masculinity.

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