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Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature

Mary Beth Rose

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For most readers and spectators, heroism takes the form of public, idealized masculinity. It calls to mind socially and morally elevated men embarking on active adventures: courageously confronting danger; valiantly rescuing the helpless; exploring and claiming unconquered terrain. But in this book, Mary Beth Rose argues that from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries, a passive, more female, but equally potent dimension of heroic identity began to dominate English culture. For both men and women, heroism came to be defined in terms of patience, as the ability to endure suffering, catastrophe, and pain.

Interweaving discourses of gender, Rose explores ways in which this heroics of endurance became the dominant model. She examines the glamorous, failed destinies of heroes in plays by Shakespeare, Jonson, and Marlowe; Elizabeth I's creation of a heroic identity in her public speeches; the autobiographies of four ordinary women thrust into the public sphere by civil war; and the seduction of heroes into slavery in works by Milton, Aphra Behn, and Mary Astell. Ultimately, her study demonstrates the importance of the female in the creation of modern heroism, while offering a critique of both idealized action and suffering.

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