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Reconceptualizing Masculinity

Review Essay by Christine James

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The Male Body: features, destinies, exposures

Laurence Goldstein, ed.

University of Michigan Press, 1994

Beyond Patriarchy: essays by men on pleasure, power, and change

Michael Kaufman, ed.

Oxford University Press, 1987

Rethinking Masculinity: philosophical explorations in light of feminism

Larry May and Robert Strikwerda, eds.

Rowman Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992

Engendering Men: the question of male feminist criticism

Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, eds.

Routledge, 1990

Recent feminist and postmodern thought has critiqued traditional conceptions of masculinity, describing the effect that the distinctive masculinity of the "man of reason" has had on the history of philosophy, on consciousness, and on the academy. A common characteristic of the recent literature on masculinity is that it reflects the historical and cultural context in which it is written—a context of binary, hierarchical dualisms which involve certain symbolic associations.¹ These dualisms, such as Man-Woman, masculine-feminine, and reason-emotion, arguably find their roots in Pythagorean philosophy and can be traced through the Renaissance to our current historical context. One example is our conception of reason: the association of maleness with a clear, determinate mode of thought, i.e. reason, was incorporated into the form-matter distinction that was central to Greek thought.² Arguably, we can trace the influence of these hierarchical dualisms into our own historical context.³

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It is these dualisms that have traditionally ascribed a higher status to the masculine side of the Man-Woman dichotomy than the feminine.⁴ The prevalence of these dualisms suggests that the hierarchical dualism of "Man" and "Woman" is so pervasive that if we rewrite or redefine the inferior, deprivileged side of that dualism, we cannot correct its devalued status.⁵ Instead, one can only redefine that which is undervalued while leaving it in the same devalued position. The current literature on masculinity often attempts to formulate an alternative to rewriting or revaluing femininity: a rewriting of masculinity that can avoid the problem of status remaining despite redefinition. Theorists hope that through this redefinition, one can reconceptualize the hierarchical dualism in such a way that neither side is privileged. These attempts to reconceptualize masculinity frequently involve an attempt to allow men to be nurturers, to "get back in touch with their feelings", to incorporate traditionally feminine virtues into a new masculinity. This review of the current literature on masculinity will attempt to clarify and classify some of the reconceptualizations of masculinity currently under debate. Two major types of reconceptualizations are prominent in the literature, those which do not consider hierarchical dualisms, and those which do pay attention to and try to overcome the problems of hierarchical dualisms. After this classification, one can determine whether or not these reconceptualizations successfully avoid the problems associated with the hierarchical dualisms within which they occur. I will argue that the most promising reconceptualizations are those which address and attempt to overcome the constraint of hierarchical dichotomies, and the best of these reconceptualizations call for an open dialogue, a sharing of feminine and masculine insights that can escape the issue of Otherness as well as hierarchical dualisms.

Understanding masculinity without regard to hierarchical dichotomies

May and Strikwerda introduce their book *Rethinking Masculinity* (1992) by outlining two of the more extreme reconceptualizations of masculinity—the one end represented by John Stoltenberg, the other by Robert Bly. These can serve as two poles between which much of the current literature on masculinity can be placed.

Stoltenberg argues that because men have forced women to occupy subordinate gender roles, the very categories of masculine and feminine must be replaced by androgyny (p. xiii). It is to be noted that "what is positive in Stoltenberg's book is the 'idea' that men can choose something different from the traditional roles they seem to be thrown into" (p. xiii). Unfortunately, Stoltenberg is not explicit about what that "something different from the traditional roles" precisely is, and does not explicitly analyze the nature of "androgyny" itself. I would also argue that, because

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of the pervasiveness of the hierarchical dualisms discussed earlier, even if individuals can become androgynous, other characteristics besides gender will then become the standards by which some individuals achieve a higher "symbolic status" than others.⁶

An alternative view on masculinity is presented by Robert Bly. Bly claims that women, primarily since feminism, have created a situation in which men, especially young men, feel weak, emasculated, and unsure of themselves; and that older men must lead the way back to a tradition in which "the divine... was associated with mad dancers, fierce fanged men." Bly holds up the myth of the Wild Man as an exemplar of the way in which men should reform their lives. Like Stoltenberg, Bly never challenges the hierarchical dualisms that are so integrally linked to the tension he perceives between men and women. Arguably, the notion of the Wild Man merely reinforces clichés about "real masculinity" instead of trying to foster a new relationship between men and women. Another troubling aspect of Bly and Stoltenberg's work is their conceptualization of Man and Woman in terms of who is to blame for the current situation of gender roles—a focus I find counterproductive.

The extremes of Bly and Stoltenberg's views on masculinity can also be found in selections from Laurence Goldstein's edited collection *The Male Body: features, desires, exposures* (1994). This text, adapted from a special issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, differs from most of the current collections on masculinity in that it includes many personal narratives. There is a balance between scholarly pieces and personal prose and poetry reflecting on male embodied experience. While the personal narratives found in *The Male Body* are important because of the insights they provide on men's embodied experience, in many ways they fail to challenge hierarchical dichotomies, instead repeating their problems. For example John Updike's piece, "The Disposable Rocket," depends on the alignment of maleness with activity, femaleness with passivity: "from the standpoint of reproduction, the male body is a delivery system, as the female is a mazy device for retention" (p. 8); "the ideal male body is taut with lines of potential force...the ideal female body curves around centers of repose" (p. 9). The most promising revisionings of masculinity in the collection come from the theoretical pieces. Susan Bordo's contribution, "Reading the male body," for example, discusses the men of the Valois cafeteria, who have formed a "community of caring" which shuns proofs of masculinity (p. 299). Unfortunately, this possibility for challenging the hierarchical associations of masculinity and femininity falls short when we find that women are not yet part of this "caring" community; as Bordo notes, "many (of the men) are anguished by their inability to meet women who share their ideas and values" (p. 299).

Beyond Patriarchy: essays by men on pleasure, power, and change (1987) reflects a key point in the beginning of the critique of masculinity as it was published nearly a decade ago. The collection gives an analysis of the oppression of women and of gay men, the social structures of domination and the individual expression of these structures, and a description of how men are scarred and brutalized by the very system that gives men privileges and power. One of the essays, "Male sexuality: toward a theory of liberation," addresses the dichotomy of activity and passivity as well as the struggle between the two sides of the dichotomy which "forms the structure of...psychic reality" (p. 91). While this article gives attention to these hierarchical dichotomies, it provides very little in terms of how to go about escaping or revisioning them. As the conclusion notes, "the goal is liberation and integration: social, political, economic—and sexual" (p.101); but we are left to ask how such liberation and integration can be initiated.

Addressing hierarchical dichotomies

Other recent re-characterizations of masculinity have more successfully addressed the problem of hierarchical dichotomies found in *The Male Body* and *Beyond Patriarchy*. In this section I will review four essays that can be found in *May and Stryker*, eds. *Rethinking Masculinity: philosophical explorations in the light of feminism* (1992): Brian Pronger's description of the "gay jock", Leonard Harris' essay on Martin Luther King, Jr., May and Stryker's two essays on the "father-as-nurturer" and men's intimacy. I find that hierarchical dichotomies are addressed in each essay, but not always in a satisfactory fashion.

In "Gay jocks: a phenomenology of gay men in athletics", Brian Pronger defines masculinity as "a strategy for the power relations between men and women; it is a strategy that serves the interests of patriarchal heterosexuality" (p. 44). Through defining masculinity in this way (patriarchal heterosexuality), Pronger can argue that gay men can be a very powerful example of how to reconceptualize masculinity. Pronger describes the ease with which gay men can be friends with women, and the mutually comfortable nature of such relationships: "all the gay men I interviewed told me their relationships with women are very good; the men feel themselves to be on equal terms with women, and women seem to trust these men more than they do other men" (p. 44).⁷ Pronger further notes that the ease of social intercourse between gay men and women makes possible personal relations with women that are not patriarchal. Although Pronger acknowledges that these descriptions only take place in the realm of personal interactions, and that gay men therefore probably do experience patriarchal privilege in wider social contexts, these experiences do pro-

vide an important insight into masculinity as a political strategy. After exposing the strategy of masculinity, Pronger calls for a reinterpretation of the meanings of masculine and feminine behavior. Gay men, according to Pronger, see that the power relations for which the semiotics of masculinity and femininity constitute a strategy have little to do with their lives, and that they can therefore change the meaning of masculinity. Since this is an insight that is primarily known to gay men, it serves only as a good starting point for raising awareness about what masculinity is. While Pronger does show an awareness of the hierarchical value and power structure to which masculinity is linked, his essay gives little hope for a way out of that hierarchy.

Another possible redefinition of masculinity comes from Leonard Harris' "Honor: emasculation and empowerment," an essay which focuses on Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Harris argues that each of these men exemplified a vision of communal love and a new model of masculinity which "in both cases, represented a form of empowerment in a direct sense... it was a good through which one engenders...the ability of others to impose their will" (p. 202). This empowerment is achieved in many ways: parents help empower their children by caring, nurturing, guiding, and partners empower each other by support dialogue and aid (p. 202). Pronger and Harris call attention to the fact that once we understand masculinity as a social construct, the attempt to incorporate it with the more traditionally feminine virtues (i.e. caring) is highly problematic: as Harris notes, "the imposition of wills through threats, demands, pressure and aggressive behavior is not neatly separated from love, care, compassion, and sacrifice" (p. 203). Harris' essay is valuable because it points to the complexities of hierarchical dualisms, but unfortunately it does not provide a promising suggestion for overcoming those complexities.

May and Strikwerda address these same issues in both of their pieces, "Fatherhood and nurturance" and "Male friendship and intimacy". In "Fatherhood and nurturance", May and Strikwerda discuss the possibility and benefits of men gaining the traditionally feminine attribute of nurturance in the context of caring for their children. Central to this nurturance is paying attention to feelings; especially their children's feelings, but also their own: "Fathers will have to face their own feelings of regret or shame for having inappropriately punished as well as the need to rebuild trust and a positive sense of self-worth in the child. And the trusting relationship that develops will have strongly positive payoffs for the future relationship between father and older child. In addition, their work in the family will be something about which they can feel a sense of accomplishment" (p. 88). Here May and Strikwerda offer an exciting possibility for a new vision of masculinity. Ar-

guably, they address the problematic dualism of reason-feeling by giving men a role in which they must face up to their own feelings as well as those of their children. May and Strikwerda also have a means by which men's work in the home can be revalued—men can feel a new sense of accomplishment about their fathering role. A time of transition will be necessary, and will occur with the first generation of men to act as nurturers, who still have the traditionally socialized masculine attributes of toughness, aggressiveness, and an alleged prowess in the public sphere:

In this time of transition, nurturing fathers could use their socialized public skills to provide positive socialization especially for their girl children. Due to their socialization, men are better able to teach kids how to fend for themselves, especially how to assert themselves into a sometimes hostile world or sandbox. Given the differential socializations already experienced by adults today, fathers will be somewhat better at such roles than mothers. And by this we do not mean merely teaching girls to throw the ball "properly" (that is, not like a girl). Rather, we have in mind taking children on regular outings to the playground or museum or just to the corner store and talking to one's children about strategies for coping with disparate problems, especially with male strangers, that can be encountered along the way (p. 89).

This seems at first glance like a very sweet idea—fathers showing their children the ropes of how to get along in the world. Unfortunately, the passage buys into many dubious assumptions about men's capabilities in certain areas of life. It is wrong to assume that this alleged male prowess in certain roles is indisputably a good thing, both on the level of essentialist claims about men and women's capabilities ("fathers will be somewhat better at such roles than mothers"), and that the male-socialized way of handling situations is the best way of doing things ("men are better able to teach kids how to defend themselves"). There is great potential in such a situation for the more negative socialized masculine roles to be passed on to either sex. The possibility of negative socialized traits being passed on to children also brings up the question when, if ever, will this transitional stage end? What keeps certain negative roles from being passed on? It is also doubtful that the problems "with male strangers" is actually the correct issue to focus on, since most child molestation involves a relative or someone the child knew, quite possibly the male role model May and Strikwerda describe. Thus May and Strikwerda have a very promising notion in the model of the nurturing father, but they put the model to bad use.

Epistemology and Politics: suggesting a new direction in theory of masculinity

The current literature on masculinity reflects the fact that when men do the work of revaluing a deprivileged side of a dichotomy like "feelings," they are perceived as achieving an epistemological as well as political goal: getting at a more accurate vision of what men are really like, uncovering hidden emotions, or regaining some other piece of better truth. This better epistemology also fulfills a practical value in rectifying a perceived lack, a lack of intimacy or of full emotional growth. This dual teleology of reconceptualizing masculinity is clearly exemplified by May and Strikwerda's project, in which they claim that men "do increasingly see themselves as lacking in intimate relationships. Thus we try to provide a positive sense of what *male friendship* could be like in a less oppressive society. It is our hope that if men do become more *caring with each other*, they will also become so with the women and children in their lives, *thus making it less likely that oppression will continue at its present level*" (pp. 96-97, my italics).

May and Strikwerda show that their project is driven toward more than the removal of oppression—indeed, the removal of women's oppression is simply a happy side effect of men achieving greater intimacy in relationships amongst themselves! I would argue that May and Strikwerda are primarily interested in providing a positive sense of what intimate male friendship can be like, primarily to help fill men's lack of intimacy. This reflects a subtle difference in how men's and women's writings on gender are perceived: it is often the case that women feminists' work is read as primarily political, while men's work is viewed as an attempt to correct perceived lacks and to achieve a better epistemology. One can argue that this harkens back to Aristotle's distinction between a happy life defined by political work and an even better happy life defined by theory and study.⁹ Quite tellingly, our exemplary male theorists' visions of male friendship seems forced to buy into some of the old hierarchies, and essentialisms, about what is feminine and masculine as well. On May and Strikwerda's model, male friendships can begin with *doing activities together* (ancient Greek activity/passivity dichotomy revisited), and then slowly as men learn to reflect more on their emotions and be more in touch with their feelings, they can begin to express traditionally feminine emotions like caring (pp. 106-107).

Another collection of current writings on masculinity offers a more plausible and optimistic suggestion for dialogues between genders, a suggestion which can also serve as a means towards escaping the problem of hierarchical dualisms. *Engendering Men: the question of male feminist criticism* (1990), as its title suggests, reflects further work by men with attention to gender, feminist insights on gender,

and the seemingly "genderless" quality of masculinity within patriarchy. This collection has a clear focus on literary theory, and includes selections with important insights into the work of women writers such as Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Wendy Wasserstein as well as queer theorists and the concept of "gay reading". The most compelling suggestion found in this collection is the call for simultaneous reading of male and female traditions and canons, a notion credited to Myra Jehlen, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. Such simultaneous readings allow (for example) the reading of work by Gwendolyn Brooks in comparison to Paul Laurence Dunbar and Claude McKay. All too often in Women's Studies courses, only the work of women is read; all too often when one thinks of literature on masculinity one thinks of male authors.¹⁰ Instead, the insights of both men and women, both members of the hierarchical dualisms which shape our social context, should be read together. This notion of simultaneous readings is a promising way to avoid the problem of constructing women's and feminists' work as "Other."¹¹ The avoidance of "Otherness" is a promising first step toward alleviating the problem of the hierarchical dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. By reading the work of men and women together, and by analogy the work of members of different races and classes together, one can see the possibility for opening up new dialogues and a new, less hierarchical relationship between members of those groups.

Endnotes

¹ One way in which these symbolic associations can be understood is through the project of "rewriting." "Rewriting or redefining Woman" has held different meanings for different theorists. This paper will primarily employ the Judith Butler sense of the phrase, in which "Woman" does not really signify any one woman, but rather a performance of womanhood that is in line with certain symbolic meanings of femininity, certain gendered codings of masculine/feminine behavior, dress, etc. Thus a redefining or rewriting necessarily entails some change in these symbolic structures and codings.

² This association is explicitly described in Plato's *Symposium*, as in Diotima's speech which metaphorically links the highest form of love with activities that are procreative and intellectually creative, and which only occur between men. A similar theme is present in much of Aristotle, as in the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter (*Metaphysics VII Z, 15-17*), and the relationship of that distinction to reproduction. On the Aristotelian view, the father was seen as providing the formative principle, the real causal force of generation, while the mother provided only matter which received form or determination, and nourished what had been produced by the father (Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1984, pp. 3).

¹ One example can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions of "masculine" and "feminine." Echoing the ancient Greek association of masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity, the OED defines these terms so that power is the distinguishing feature of masculinity, whereas lack of power is the distinguishing feature of femininity. "Masculine" is defined as having the appropriate *excellences* of the male sex: "manly, virile, vigorous, powerful" while "feminine" is defined in a deprecative sense as "womanish, effeminate". The OED definition of effeminacy provides an even clearer example of how femininity and passivity are still entwined: the OED defines effeminate as "to make *unmanly*; to enervate. To grow weak, languish" (described in Brian Pronger's *Gay Jocks: a phenomenology for gay men in athletics*, in Larry May and Robert Strikwerda 1992, 44).

⁴ Here I refer to the Pythagorean table of opposites which was formulated in the sixth century B.C., and specifically aligned the male with the superior side of ten hierarchical dichotomies, and the female with the bad or inferior side. Some of these were (with the superior side listed first): limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/many, right/left, male/female, rest/motion, etc.

⁵ This is the unfortunate criticism often levied against such feminist theorists as Alison Jagger (see *Love and Knowledge: emotion in feminist epistemology* in Jagger and Susan Bordo, 1989, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989) and Carol Gilligan (see *In a Different Voice: Psychological theory and women's development*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁶ By "symbolic status" I refer again to the relative values ascribed to the various sides of hierarchical dichotomies. After achieving androgyny, I would argue, we would simply find something other than gender to ascribe value, such as race (black-white) or class (rich-poor) and thereby keep people in their place. What we need to search for is a way to avoid dualistic valuing altogether.

⁷ Taken from Mitchell Dunleir, *Slim's Table*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 41.

⁸ In making this argument, Pronger refers to a specifically "gay irony": a unique way of knowing that has its origins in the social construction of heterosexual society (p. 48).

⁹ This reading of theorists of masculinity like May and Strikwerda against feminist theorists like Alison Jagger is especially ironic, since Jagger's explicitly stated goal is a better, specifically theoretical, epistemological model that includes feeling and reason, while the notion that May and Strikwerda get at better truth about men's emotions seems to naturally follow from their discussion of men perceiving a lack in their own lives.

¹⁰ I assert that the suggestion of separate discursive spaces for men and women is outdated, primarily because of the group of men to whom the suggestion is made. Another men's discursive space, the Cambridge Men's Group, as described in David Porter's *Between Men and Feminism* (New York: Routledge 1992), serves to illustrate my point: while both Robert Bly and the Cambridge Men's Group each advocate and participate in male-only discursive spaces, the reason for such spaces is quite different for the Bly "everyman" and the Cambridge Men's Group academics. At this time in the theoretical and academic understanding of both masculinity and femininity, I believe we are ready for and already beginning a very powerful dialogue between the genders. It is more difficult to argue against Bly's perceived

need for male-only discursive spaces outside the academic world, because Bly calls not only for separate discursive spaces but a new kind of "Man" to participate in those spaces. This should not be taken as a hierarchical valuing of men who do theoretical work vs. those who do not, I simply think that male-only discursive spaces serve an important purpose in certain contexts, and that that purpose has already been served in the academic context (arguably, for thousands of years). In the longer piece on which this review is based, I present this argument in greater detail.

¹¹ By the construction of Otherness, I mean the way in which work done by women in a given field may be pointed out as Other than or outside the norm, thus maintaining a hierarchical, dualistic relationship between male and female (for example, describing someone as "one of the best female jazz musicians" rather than as "one of the best jazz musicians").