

What Is Masculinity?

MALENESS AND MASCULINITY ARE NOT THE SAME THING. We commonly recognize a distinction between facts of biology and masculine identity. Simply being an adult male is not enough; one must in addition *be a man*, which means more than simply having a male body. Being a man in the fullest sense is a matter of the will, a choice to live in a certain way. A male can be praised for acting like a man, or blamed for not being manly.

Psychology and anthropology support the popular distinction between sex and gender. *Sex* is what the body is, that is, male or female. *Gender* is everything that is not limited to the body; it is a complex of behavior, mental qualities, and personality characteristics—everything we mean when we say that someone is masculine, a real man, a *Mensch*, or (more rarely), feminine, a real woman, a lady. Gender sometimes refers specifically to sexual behavior; that is, *masculinity* can mean the male desire for heterosexual intercourse, but I do not mean it in that restricted sense. Gender means, in a distinction that is becoming widely accepted, the wide range of qualities and behavior (including the sexual) that make up the realities we call masculine and feminine. Maleness is a physical quality, masculinity a cultural and spiritual one, although one that is connected with the physical realities of being male. Nevertheless, a male must be initi-

ated into the mysteries of masculinity before he can become a man in the fullest sense of the word, and it is this initiation that is the theme of much of world literature, from Homer to Hemingway.

BIOLOGY

The first thing to note is that the female is the norm from which the male must be differentiated. The basic pattern of the human body is roughly female, as one would expect in a mammalian species, and male characteristics develop from that pattern only under certain circumstances. “The female,” says J. M. Tanner, “is the ‘basic sex’ into which embryos develop if not stimulated to do otherwise.”¹ Even the primary sex characteristics of males are produced by the action of androgens on a fetus with female genitals. The presence of nipples on the male body is a constant reminder that the male is a variation on the basic female type.

Moreover, the male is expendable. His physical role in reproduction is over in a few moments, and for almost all species that is the end of his involvement. The cultural role that human society has developed for males, that of the expendable sex, is rooted in his biological status, his lesser role in reproduction. The male can die and the species still reproduce. But if the mother dies before the child is capable of taking care of itself, the child will die and with it the hope for the propagation of the species.

While the male body itself explains male behavior to some extent, it does not determine it, but rather gives males a predisposition to act in certain ways. Nevertheless, some qualities emerge so early in childhood it is hard to know whether they are based in biology or are the first stages of masculine psychological development. Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin have concluded that four differences appear so early in childhood that they could be described as innate. First, “girls have greater verbal abilities”; that is, girls are more fluent than boys and are also better at understanding difficult reading material and at creative writing. Second, “boys excel in visual-spatial tasks” and increase their lead over girls as their testosterone levels

increase during adolescence. Third, “boys excel in mathematical ability,” a difference in which boys also increase their lead during adolescence. Fourth, and most obvious, “males are more aggressive,” even from infancy.² The reaction of testosterone and adrenaline gives a pleasurable high, encouraging men to seek danger. Men have greater upper body strength and a higher ratio of muscle to body fat that enables them to face danger and survive.

Yet there is some evidence that even these qualities are not exactly innate. Male children deprived of a father in early childhood will not develop some of these qualities. A study of Harvard students identified a group whose fathers had been in the military and were away during their infancy. These male students were high achievers, but were highly verbal and had academic profiles of high-achieving female students. At the other end of the social spectrum, in the inner city, boys whose fathers were absent also showed little of the masculine tendency to excel in math. Hence, these qualities are not a given, but they are potentialities that will develop in favorable circumstances. They provide the raw material for masculine behavior, but they do not in themselves constitute masculinity. Males who mature in a biologically normal fashion may still fail to be men. What must be added to male biology is masculinity, which is not a physical, but a cultural and spiritual quality.³

The male body is differentiated from the female by a complex process which can go wrong at many points and which is the basis of the later psychological differentiation that parallels and reinforces it. Like the physical differentiation on which it is based, the psychological differentiation of the male from the female, that is, masculinization, is a fragile and complex process. The boy must achieve masculinity by rejecting the female and differentiating himself from the feminine to which he reverts unless he constantly exerts himself—a reversion which will destroy him as a man. The power of the female identity, which males try to escape, is the basis of the fundamental “bisexuality” that Freud and others have observed in human nature. Bisexuality is a vague word, since it implies that male and female are present in the same way, but femaleness is a condition

from which the male is already differentiated biologically. A male that does not undergo the later psychological differentiation is not a female, but a failed man.

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

According to developmental psychologists, personality traits are set down, at least in outline, during infancy. What we experience in the first months and years of life gives us categories of thought of which we are often scarcely aware, but by which we tend to organize and classify later experiences. The relationship to the mother is crucial. Boys and girls have different developmental patterns because a girl is the same sex as the parent to whom she is closest, her mother, while the boy is a different sex from the mother and may never even know his father. A girl, though she must develop her own identity, can model it after her mother's, while the boy must, in a sense, reject his mother, or he will never become masculine.

At first an infant, male or female, exists in an oceanic consciousness, in which the mother and child merge into one, blissful, erotic identity.⁴ Gradually the child realizes the mother is a distinct person, and a boy realizes further that his mother is in some way alien to him. This gives males and females distinct personality patterns: "From the retention of preoedipal attachment to their mother," Nancy Chodorow claims, "growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate."⁵ This process occurs first of all because the boy learns that the mother's body is undeniably different from his: "The very body parts that confirm his male identity are ones she does not have."⁶ If a boy fails to achieve this differentiation, he will have problems with his identity as a male.⁷ Becoming a man begins with a break with the mother, but continues throughout life with a rejection of the feminine.⁸

But even if he achieves differentiation, a boy must complete his masculine identity by identifying with a male, especially his father, whom he sees is loved by his mother. He must give up his desire to *be* his mother, and learn to *love* her, or at least to love another woman. But to love any woman as an adult the boy must first reject his mother—or more accurately, being mothered—because her femininity is a trap that will lure him back into an infantile narcissism. Hence, he dreads the feminine as a perpetual threat to his masculinity.⁹ Likewise, he must give up a desire to love the male erotically, as his mother does, and instead learn to be a full male, that is, a father.

Even if all goes well with this complex process of disidentification from the female and counter-identification with the male, the boy will still have problems, although they will be ones that are intrinsic to being a male. The consciousness of the primal union with his mother and the break he has had to endure creates a wound in the masculine personality.¹⁰ There is always a nagging feeling of alienation, that the primal experience of loving, blissful, narcissistic unity cannot be trusted. This fundamental psychological experience already leads the boy to misogyny, a mistrust of women, and insensitivity, an inability to place trust in another and to commit himself to that other.

But a boy derives a benefit from this psychic wound, or at least is made to benefit society by his attempts to deal with the wound. Since a girl maintains a far closer identification with her mother (and therefore with others in general) she learns to tolerate or accommodate frustration so as not to break this unity. On the other hand, “the male infant discovers that you can reject a source of frustration, and simultaneously, find a stance independent of it.”¹¹ A boy finds an endless source of psychic energy in the space between himself and his mother, as well as an opportunity for a strong sense of agency, of acting on the world to change it, rather than simply accepting it.

Masculinity and femininity are characterized, respectively, by separation and communion, as David Bakan describes: “Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separation.”¹² Bakan explains that agency manifests itself “in

isolation, alienation, and aloneness . . . in the urge to master . . . in the repression of thought, feeling, and impulse . . .,” and that communion manifests itself in “contact, openness, and union . . . in noncontractual cooperation . . . in the lack and removal of repression.”¹³ The process of the formation of agency parallels the formation of masculine identity: “The very split of agency from communion, which is a separation, arises from the agency feature itself; and it represses the communion from which it has separated itself.”¹⁴ Separation implies death, and in the Freudian view is based on “the separation of the ego from the world” which produces “aggression.”¹⁵ Satan, according to Bakan, is the image of “agency unmitigated by communion.”¹⁶ Both by their maleness and by their masculinity, men, far more than women, are oriented to death, as all statistics of mortality show, and men are often tempted to the final separation of nihilism, which is satanic. Even their different sexual responses reinforce the difference between men and women. Since “the aim of agency is the *reduction of tension*, whereas the aim of communion is *union*,”¹⁷ men seek to reduce tension (the *petite mort* of orgasm is a parallel and foretaste of the final death of the body), while women seek communion, which is initially fulfilled in pregnancy, but stretches forth to a communion with all beings that reaches beyond death.

Hudson and Jacot find evidence of this wound of alienation in the male tendency to invest passion in abstractions rather than things, because abstractions cannot betray. Men also let this experience of separation influence the way they think. The masculine mind likes “arguments cast in terms of dualities and dialectical oppositions . . . that depend on the maintenance of conceptual boundaries and segregations . . . that depend on a deep preoccupation with similarities and differences . . . that are reductive.”¹⁸ This pattern of thought characterizes the Western philosophical and scientific tradition, which is sometimes more pronouncedly masculine than at other times, but always bears the imprint of the masculine minds which formed it. As Walter Ong notes, “we find adversatives in the all but ubiquitous Mother Earth and Father Sky, the Chinese *li* and *chi*, yin and yang, Empedoclean attraction and repulsion, the Platonic dialectic, matter and form, Abelard’s *sic et non*, essence and existence,

Hegelian dialectic, and countless other binary modes of analysis.”¹⁹ The computer, with its binary switches, is but the latest incarnation of male thought patterns.

ANTHROPOLOGY

David Gilmore, an anthropologist from Yale, analyzes the phenomenon of masculinity in *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*.²⁰ Gilmore discovered that almost all human societies have an ideology of masculinity, a set of beliefs the purpose of which is to convince boys to undertake the dangerous work in society. Manhood, on this view, is not inborn, but a great and difficult achievement, “a matter of storm and stress, of challenges and trials.”²¹ The infantile and the feminine are always threatening to drag a man back, to keep him from achieving masculinity. Males have a “need for constant vigilance against their unacceptable yearning to return to the merging in the symbiosis” of mother and child.²² Paradoxically, men cultivate misogyny for the sake of women: A man must give up the state of boyhood, in which he is protected by women, fed by women, and cared for by women, so that he may become a protector and provider for women and children. In other words, he must give up being mothered before he can become a father. He must reject the feminine in himself, cultivating a distance from the world of women, so that he can one day return to it, not as a recipient, but as a giver.

To be masculine, a man must be willing to fight and inflict pain, but also to suffer and endure pain. He seeks out dangers and tests of his courage and wears the scars of his adventures proudly. He does this not for his own sake, but for the community’s, to protect it from its enemies, both human and natural. Masculine self-affirmation is, paradoxically, a kind of self-abnegation. A man must always be ready to give up his life: “The accepting of this very expendability ... often constitutes the measure of manhood, a circumstance that may help explain the constant emphasis on risk-taking as evidence of manliness.”²³ A woman faces danger in childbirth, a risk that she cannot (in pre-contraceptive societies) escape. A man has to accept

danger freely and willingly, or else he is not masculine, nor yet is he feminine, since his sex preserves him from the burdens of childbirth. A woman bleeds in menstruation and childbirth; a man bleeds in war, or in the rituals of circumcision and of subincision, or in the hazardous occupations he undertakes so that women may raise their children in safety. It is only through suffering and violence that men can achieve what women achieve by their almost-compulsory experience of childbirth: “Men nurture their society by shedding their blood, their sweat, and their semen, by bringing home food for both child and mother, and by dying if necessary in faraway places to provide a safe haven for their people.”²⁴

Male social dominance must be seen in this context. A man seeks power and wealth and success not for himself, but for others. He is honored for his willingness to serve and to die, his “selfless generosity, even to the point of sacrifice”²⁵ and is therefore given charge of the community. Masculinity is an honor, but often a deadly one. As Michael Levin points out, “If sex roles are to be regarded as the outcome of bargaining in which men received dominance in exchange for the risk of violent death, it is hardly clear that they got the better deal.”²⁶ Walter Farrell, in *The Myth of Male Power*,²⁷ and Herb Goldberg, in *The Hazards of Being Male*,²⁸ have documented that men have more physical and mental diseases, commit more crimes, go to jail more often, and finally die earlier than women: “every critical statistic in the area of longevity, disease, suicide, crime, accidents, childhood emotional disorders, alcoholism, and drug addiction shows a disproportionately higher male rate.”²⁹ Men willingly take far more than their share of the risks in society; of the twenty most dangerous civilian occupations, all but one are almost entirely male.³⁰ The history of human suffering makes it hard to say whether men or women have suffered more.³¹

Both men and women still think of men as privileged, but the ideology of masculinity is not a rational construct. Masculinity is paradoxical: It is the privilege of dying that others may live, which is, in the highest philosophical and religious sense, a privilege. Yet it is surprising how many men, especially those not philosophically or religiously inclined, are willing to follow this path of self-sacrifice,

and regard it as a privilege. Although masculine self-sacrifice has been abused, it is not something which society can do without. Masculinity has always been full of dangerous paradoxes that stem from the very root of masculine identity: the separation of the male from the feminine from which he sprang. As Goldberg explains, "If he is in touch with and expressive of his feminine component he may be subject to great feelings of anxiety and humiliation. If he successfully manages to repress, disown, and deny this critical part of himself he will have to live as an incomplete person, alienated from an important part of himself and consequently susceptible to emotional and interpersonal rigidity and numerous psychological and psychophysiological problems that result from this repression."³²

A THEORY OF MASCULINITY

The masculine is a pattern of initial union, separation, and reunion, while the feminine is a maintenance of unity. This pattern is found on the biological level, and even more on the psychological, anthropological, and cultural levels. Femininity is not merely receptivity or passivity, as some have thought. Activity and receptivity are both proper to the masculine and the feminine in distinctive ways. The maintenance of unity typical of the feminine may not be as obviously a state of activity as the pattern of separation and reunification typical of the masculine, but the integration of personality, social unity, and love require effort.

Nevertheless, the most striking feature of masculinity is its separation from the feminine, and it is this part of the developmental pattern that is usually thought of as uniquely masculine. As Richard A. Hawley says, "Masculinity is best understood as a trajectory ... a journey or a quest."³³ It is always a journey away from something, especially the feminine: "The male trajectory begins with the first gesture of separation from the mother. This need to differentiate sets the boy on a life-long path of, literally, proving himself."³⁴ Yet this is only part of masculinity. Having achieved his first goal of separation, a man must then achieve a reunion and reconnection with the feminine, although one which is marked by his departure from it. The

first union is sterile, and must be broken, so that this second, fruitful union may take place. This second union is achieved only through a man's suffering the pain of separation and in his confrontation with death.

Masculinity is not a state or quality, but a pattern of union and separation. It is never fully possessed, but always to be lived. It has its biological basis in the differentiation of maleness from the basic female pattern of the body. The inescapable fact that man is born of woman gives every male a taste of a painful separation, "the drama of his infant experiences as he begins to conceive of his identity in relation to the mother from whose body he issues and who is now sustaining his life. He cannot identify entirely because he is different from her, not just a separate being, but a different kind of being." The painful differentiation of his body from the female pattern and the even more painful separation from the mother prepare a boy for a life of separations, which may, if all goes well, end in reunions. As Shakespeare wrote, "Journeys end in lovers' meeting/Every wise man's son doth know."

The ideology of masculinity is founded on biology and psychology, but goes beyond them in its cultural manifestations. Simple societies can have an initiatory ritual that recognizes boys as men after they have proved themselves able and willing to confront the dangers of life. More complex societies, on the other hand, give boys no such rites of passage, and they must face every test afresh, not knowing whether they have yet proved themselves men.

Initiation

Initiation is not simply a beginning; life has many beginnings, but not every one of them is an initiation in the anthropological sense. Initiation entails a sharp break, and has a threefold structure: a departure from a previous way of life, a "liminal" period in which the one being initiated is suspended between two worlds, and the entry into a new way of life. If an initiation is profound, it can also be an experience of death and rebirth. Such a deep initiation gives the initiate insight into the mysteries of life and death and is always, in

the broad sense, a religious experience, although there are specifically religious initiations. The two basic types of initiation, the initiation of the child into adulthood and the initiation of the believer into the mysteries of a religion, have a common structure and use the same language. The initiate must leave behind one world, be transformed, and enter a new world in which he has a new status, perhaps even a new life: a boy is reborn as a man, and a believer as a new creature.

Initiation is usually marked by ceremony. Arnold van Gennep identified, in primitive societies, “ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another.”³⁵ These “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation” often have a distinct beginning, middle, and end.³⁶ Their fullness is found at the most important points in a person’s life, but they can be present even in seemingly trivial events. Writing before World War I, van Gennep reminded his readers that although “a person in these days may pass freely from one civilized region to another,”³⁷ in previous times crossing a frontier was accompanied by various formalities, not only legal, but even religious.

Tribal societies have a simple structure and often a single initiatory event for boys. Such societies usually have a simple economy and face a limited number of dangers. To be a man in these societies, therefore, is a simpler, although still difficult, process. Though anthropologists find it more convenient to examine well-defined ceremonies, the meaning and essence of these rites may inhere in events that are not recognizable as ceremonies. Many societies, such as the ancient Germanic and Mediterranean, did not have a single puberty rite: A boy had to go through many tests to prove himself a man. Such initiations have parallels in more developed societies, including our own. The general absence of ceremony in our own culture has meant that a boy who seeks initiation finds it outside of ceremonies, in seemingly secular events that take on a religious significance for the one who achieves his initiation through them. Any sort of transition can become sufficiently important, depending on social circumstances, to be surrounded by the full panoply of the rites of passage.

The first stage, that of departure, is marked by a rite of separation, which removes the individual from a common life and sets him apart from the rest of humanity. This separation can be accomplished by physical movement—sending a young man off into the wilderness; by changes in the body—painting or mutilation or scarification; by a symbolic death—a descent into the earth or water; or by a feast of some kind. All these rites serve to mark the end of one stage of life that must be rejected if the boy is to grow. The more important the transition, the more violent and thorough the separation. Each transition may have its own rite of separation, so a life may be marked by many such rites, separations from childhood, from bachelorhood, from civilian life, from homeland, from life itself.

After being separated from the previous way of life, the individual enters a transitional stage in which he is neither the person he was before, nor the person he will become after being incorporated into the new way of life for which he is destined. This is the liminal stage, from the Latin *limes*, a threshold. The liminal stage is one of chaos, in which the individual hovers between two worlds—between childhood and adulthood, between boy and man, between the profane and the sacred: “The coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both.”³⁸ From this undifferentiated state of chaos a new identity is born.

The initiation is completed by rites of incorporation, in which the person enters a new way of life, a new world, and assumes a new identity. He is now an initiate, and has new knowledge, new powers, new abilities, and new wisdom. He may receive a new name, or new clothes, to embody his new status. He has been reborn, to a greater or lesser degree, as a new person. Thus, all males who mature into men experience some initiation into masculinity. The process of masculine development demands that a boy experience something that he would not attain on his own simply by following his boyish desires for security or his adolescent instincts and appetites.

Puberty rituals are mainly an enactment of the psychological separation that the boy must achieve from his mother. The three

stages that van Gennep identified, separation, transition, and incorporation are visible in these ceremonies. Among the Australian Kurnai, the pattern of separation is vivid: "The intention of all that is done at this ceremony is to make a momentous change in the boy's life; the past is to be cut off from him by a gulf that he can never repass. His connection with his mother as her child is broken off, and he becomes henceforth attached to the men."³⁹ The initiate is often considered dead.⁴⁰ He is often whipped and mutilated to remove him from ordinary society, and van Gennep understands the Jewish rite of circumcision in this context.⁴¹ The Jewish boy is set apart from Gentiles and women by a mutilation that is also a separation of the flesh from the body. Only after this separation can he join the community of Israel.

The period of separation is distinctively masculine, but in the male initiation ritual the boy sometimes becomes female during the liminal, transitional phase, in which chaos returns, normal order and practice are deliberately violated, and the boy is totally separated from the protective world of the mother.⁴² The boy sometimes takes on a temporarily feminine identity, like Achilles among the maids. Sometimes the boy is simply dressed as a girl; sometimes the resemblance is carved into his body by circumcision or subincision. The boy must bleed genitally, as a woman does, before he can become a man. In the New Guinea tribe studied by Gilbert Herdt, boys have to be passive homosexual partners for older men as a necessary stage of becoming a man, even though adult homosexuality is considered peculiar, and the boys themselves feel that their role is somehow feminine.⁴³

Mircea Eliade interprets this transformation as a desire to recover unity before a fully differentiated male identity is established: "The novice has a better chance of attaining to a particular mode of being ... if he first symbolically becomes a totality. For mythical thought, a particular mode of being is necessarily preceded by a total mode of being. The androgyne is considered superior to the two sexes just because it incarnates totality and hence perfection."⁴⁴ Bruno Bettelheim theorizes that boys have an envy of the femininity

of their mother; they especially feel that men, too, should be able to have babies.⁴⁵ They therefore try to imitate menstruation, or wear feminine clothes, or act in a feminine manner in certain situations in which chaos returns, as at Halloween.

Nevertheless, this transformation into a woman is not based on simple envy of women's fertility. As Bettelheim notes, both "anthropologists and psychoanalysts agree that pain in initiation is the price adolescents must pay for the prerogatives of the adult world."⁴⁶ The boy must become like a woman, who experiences bleeding and pain because of the necessities of menstruation, conception, and childbirth. A male escapes these pains, but he will never become a full human being until he, too, learns to suffer and bleed that others may live. In transitional rites, a male is wounded so that he can achieve sympathy and compassion for his people and be trained to suffer and die for them. What a woman receives from her experience of her physical female nature, a man must receive from his culture, because he will not receive it by simply living out the logic of his male body. In other words, through initiation ceremonies, men try to achieve what women possess by nature. In her survey of the literature on initiation, Monika Vizedom notes "among the instances recorded for the societies covered, there is a great deal more emulation of women by men than vice versa."⁴⁷ A man who has not bled and suffered, a man without scars, is no man at all.⁴⁸

The boy is finally incorporated into the world of men. The periods of separation and liminality have prepared him for a new life: "The passivity of neophytes to their instructors, their malleability, which is increased by submission to ordeal, their reduction to a uniform condition, are signs of the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life."⁴⁹ The boy is taught the religion of his group, that is, those things that the group regards as sacred and ultimate. Religion, in the modern sense, is an essential element, perhaps the heart, of masculine initiation. Rosalind Miles describes this dynamic: "To be a male is the opposite of being mother. To be a man, the boy must break away from her, and the further he travels, the greater will be the success of his journey."⁵⁰ He is born again, but

this time of man, not of woman. This birth, like the first one, is bloody and violent: “To make the break, however, the boy has to be constantly encouraged, threatened, thrust forward at every turn and side, and never, never permitted to fall back.”⁵¹ Boys who undergo this transformation have a life-long bond with all others who have so suffered. Miles describes the bonding that results from masculine initiation: “No boy, of course, could ever forget an experience like this. . . . The only others able to share his experience will be those who have undergone it with him, pain for pain, blood for blood: that group will then be bonded closer than husband and wife, closer than siblings, closer than mother and child. As the boy is violently disassociated from mother, home, and family, so he is associated, with equal violence, with the group of other boys who will henceforward be from rebirth or death his blood brothers.”⁵² This blood brotherhood is very close to the comradeship that men feel in war. For some reason violence is necessary for men to attain ultimate self-transcendence through love.

These rites and the facts of human psychology upon which they are based are the foundation for similar patterns of initiation in the higher religions. The idea of death to an old nature and rebirth to a new one is common to masculine experience.⁵³ Eliade notes that “all the rites of rebirth or resurrection, and the symbols that they imply, indicate that the novice has attained to another mode of existence, inaccessible to those who have not undergone the initiatory ordeals, who have not tasted death.”⁵⁴ To be born only once is to be trapped in the secular world. Only by being born again can one enter the sacred world, and to be born again one must first die. To the Brahmins of India, the “twice born” is the one who has knowledge of the sacred. He “belongs to his caste by birth and incorporated into it by childhood rites, [and] later undergoes initiating ceremonies enacting death in a previous world and birth in a new one, and giving him the power to devote himself to the magico-religious activity that is to be his occupational specialty.”⁵⁵ Death and rebirth were also the key themes of the most deeply felt religions of the Mediterranean basin, the mystery religions.

Mystery Religions and Initiation

The popular and official mythologies of the ancient world did not really satisfy the individual's quest for religious initiation, especially the individual man's. Instead, he sought initiation in the mystery religions. All the mysteries promised the believer a death and a rebirth.

The Eleusinian mysteries of the ancient Greek world have been reconstructed by Harold Willoughby from indirect evidence.⁵⁶ They consisted of a sacred drama, sacred instruction, and the exhibition of sacred objects. The drama was based upon the myth of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, and her daughter Persephone: While gathering flowers at Eleusis, Persephone was abducted by Pluto, the god of the underworld, with the permission of Zeus, king of the gods. Demeter came to Eleusis and, disguising herself as an old woman, searched for her daughter. She was offered hospitality by the king, her identity was discovered, and she was worshipped by the populace. In return, she taught them her mysteries. She refused to let grain grow on the earth until Zeus ordered Pluto to return Persephone. Pluto relented, but Persephone had eaten some pomegranate seeds in the underworld, and had to return to her husband for three months of each year, during which Demeter would permit nothing to grow.

The Eleusinian mysteries seem to have been a reenactment of Demeter's search for Persephone on the very spot it was supposed to have occurred. After extensive preparation, the initiates gathered at night and by torchlight accompanied Demeter in her search until she was reunited with Persephone. The sacred instruction was given, and the sacred objects shown. The initiates felt that they had witnessed a death and a rebirth which somehow promised them a blessed immortality. The seriousness with which the initiates took the mysteries can be judged by the fact that, of the hundreds of thousands of initiates over a millennium, none revealed the secret.

Most of the mystery religions attracted both men and women, although there seems to be some scholarly disagreement about the degree of feminine participation. The Eleusinian, which were the

most famous and probably the most influential of the mysteries, were open to women, probably because these mysteries stemmed from agricultural rituals. The key element in all the mysteries was, for men, initiation, that is, death and rebirth. The presence of women initiates did not necessarily cause men to regard the mysteries as feminine, because the pattern of the mysteries was so intensely masculine.

The most masculine of the mysteries was the Mithraic, almost a pure religion of masculinity, a religion of soldiers who spread it throughout the Roman Empire. Women were not initiated, as far as can be determined.⁵⁷ Mithras was a young male god who eternally battled the forces of evil. Again, the secrets of his mystery were well kept, but many surviving sculptures show his killing of the bull, from whose blood grain and flowers first sprouted on the earth. Franz Cumont's reconstruction of this mystery may be too heavily influenced by Christianity,⁵⁸ but the mysteries in general have an obvious affinity to Christianity. Earlier this century, modernists such as Alfred Loisy, author of *Les Mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*, thought they had found the source of Christianity in Mithraism. At present, scholars tend to think that the mysteries of Mithras resembled Christianity closely because Mithraism borrowed from Christianity.⁵⁹ It is very likely that there is a generic resemblance and that the borrowings went both ways. The Church Fathers noticed the close resemblance and thought it was a diabolical ploy to lead the faithful astray. But the main reason that Mithraism resembled Christianity is that both were religions of masculinity, especially of the man as Savior. And the purpose of the ideology of masculinity is to teach men to save others, even at the cost of sacrificing themselves.

The ceremonies of the Easter vigil, and indeed of the whole Triduum, the three days that recount the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, have a strong atmosphere of the mysteries, not only in their essential rites (although these are common in their general structure to all religions of death and rebirth), but in their accessory rituals. Early Christians saw Christianity as the fulfillment of the mystery and Christ as the true Hierophant, the one who reveals

the sacred and initiates those who come to him. The message is clear: Christianity is the true mystery, the true initiation. It reveals true manhood, the real and ultimate contest against evil, and the triumph and victory of which the Sol Invictus, Mithras, was but a shadow. The church of the first millennium emphasized the mystery-aspect of Christianity, and its message was comprehensible to men, who forever seek to achieve an initiation that finally and in reality makes them a new man.⁶⁰

MASCULINE INITIATION AND LITERATURE

Attempting to write about masculinity and initiation in literature is very much like undertaking a history of world literature. What it is to be a man and the problems a man faces in trying to be masculine are the themes of much of the writing of the world.⁶¹ Heroic literature is concerned in a special way with the masculine, because the pattern of masculine development is manifest in a dramatic way in the literary figure of the hero, a model for men in his culture. In the life of the hero, men see what it is to become a man, what type of experiences they may expect, what achievements they must attain, what qualities they must have, for the life of the hero follows the development of masculinity that anthropologists and psychologists have observed, including the initiations that a male must undergo to become a man.⁶² The hero leaves normal life to confront death and returns to ordinary life to assume social responsibilities.

This pattern is cross-cultural: it is found in Andean folk-tales,⁶³ in Babylonian epics, in Greek epics, in Anglo-Saxon poetry.⁶⁴ Since the challenges each society faces are different, the hero's adventures are different, but the purpose for those adventures is always the same. In complex societies, such as the Greece of the Homeric age, a man must undergo repeated initiations.

Homer

Themes of initiation dominate the *Odyssey*. The departure from the normal, civilized world of childhood is often achieved by a journey

into dangerous lands. Odysseus's trials are initiatory: he must establish his identity as a man and as a hero not once, but by facing trials again and again. In doing so, he confronts man-eaters, who attack identity in a direct way by assimilating other bodies to their own. Homer describes how the cyclops Polyphemos kills Odysseus's men:

*Then he cut them up limb by limb and got supper ready,
and like a lion reared in the hills, without leaving anything,
ate them, flesh and the marrowy bones alike, (IX.291-293)⁶⁵*

The cyclops almost makes Odysseus a No Body indeed. In his pride at having escaped this threat to his physical identity, Odysseus cannot resist taunting the Cyclops by flaunting his name:

*Cyclops, if any mortal man ever asks you who it was
that inflicted upon your eye this shameful blinding,
tell him that you were blinded by Odysseus, sacker of cities,
Laertes is his father, and he makes his home in Ithaca, (IX.502-505)*

Odysseus's identity is so important to him that he brings disaster on himself by telling the cyclops his real name. The cyclops prays to Poseidon, his father, who destroys Odysseus's ship, ensuring that Odysseus returns home alone and only after great sorrow and delay.

In Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus confronts two types of loss of identity. Scylla is the devouring monster; she seizes his men and "Right in her doorway she [eats] them up" (XII.256). Charybdis represents a slightly different threat, and a more dangerous one:

*shining Charybdis sucks down the black water,
For three times a day she flows it up, and three times she sucks it
terribly down; may you not be there when she sucks down the water or
not even the Earthshaker could rescue you out of that evil. (XII.104-107)*

Charybdis represents a type of engulfment that the sea in particular threatens. Homer sees the sea as even more dangerous than man-eating monsters, for it "is primal violence ever encroaching upon the gains of civilization."⁶⁶ For Odysseus, to drown would be ignominious, "an unheroic death altogether abhorrent to the Greeks, with no

survivors to testify to the place of his going and with no tomb to mark his final resting.”⁶⁷

Odysseus is constantly tempted to retreat from the struggle to establish male identity into the safety of the feminine. David Gilmore notes that “the knight has mastered the most primitive of the demands of the pleasure principle—the temptation to drown in the arms of an omnipotent woman, to withdraw into a puerile cocoon of pleasure and safety. And in the *Odyssey*, the scene of the great decision is one in which water imagery abounds: murky grottos, dim pools, misty waterfalls.”⁶⁸ The chief threat to Odysseus’s manhood is Calypso:

Calypso is oblivion. Her name suggests cover and concealment, or engulfing; she lives “in the midst of the sea”—the middle of nowhere, as Hermes almost remarks—and the whole struggle of the fifth book, indeed of the whole poem, is not to be engulfed by that sea. When the third great wave of Book V breaks over Odysseus’ head, Homer’s words are: *ton de mega kyma kalypsen*—“and the great wave engulfed him.” If this wave had drowned him, it would have been a “vile death,” surely, as Odysseus remarks at the beginning of the storm. Much better, he says, to have died where “the spears flew thickest” at Troy; then he would have had “recognition,” *kleos*.⁶⁹

The hero represents Everyman (at least every freeborn warrior), because all men in cultures of manhood, especially in warrior cultures, face the problem of establishing a male identity. By the example of heroes, men are constantly encouraged to resist “indolence, self-doubt, squeamishness, hesitancy, the impulse to withdraw or surrender, the ‘sleepiness’ of quietude (symbolized in Greek legend in death by drowning—a universal metaphor for returning to the womb).”⁷⁰ Threats of engulfment of the hero dominate the *Odyssey*, but he triumphs over them, returns home, and reestablishes his position in Ithacan society. Having escaped being eaten, Odysseus makes the suitors who have been devouring his substance eat death:

Now is the time for their dinner to be served the Achaians

*in the daylight, then follow with other entertainment,
the dances and the lyre; for these things come at the end of feasting.*

(XXI.428-430)

The hero by his deeds can hold off the forces of engulfment and preserve his identity as a man, remaining a model for those who also wish to become men.

The Hero

The hero is the one who is fully initiated into the mystery of masculinity. He leaves the ordinary world, and is separated from the feminine—the mother, the protection of society—and journeys out into an alien world of chaos to confront danger, monsters, and ultimately death itself. Having died, in some sense, the hero is reborn and attains a wisdom that comes only from suffering. He then can be reincorporated into the normal world that includes the feminine and become the king.

The hero embodies on an almost super-human scale what every male must endure. The hero at birth is “different from other men,”⁷¹ just as males are different from women, set apart from the basic female pattern of the body, and just as boys realize they are different from their mothers and have a different destiny. The hero is not only different, he is too much for the institutions of ordinary life: “His endowments of strength, initiative and courage are too great to be contained easily.”⁷² The problems of both developing and controlling masculinity are familiar to all societies that cultivate an ideology of masculinity.

The hero leaves the familiar world to confront danger, whether it is human, monstrous, or divine. The boy must leave the safe, protective world of his mother to confront the dangers of life, to seek his fortune in a hostile world, to journey afar to meet the strange and alien, or to protect his people in the ultimate test of masculinity: war. A warrior must be able both to give and to receive pain, as Odysseus’s name shows. The root of the name *Odysseus* is the verb *odyssathia*, which means “to cause pain (*odyne*), and to be willing to do so.”⁷³

The hero faces death; indeed he descends into death, and only after this descent and his rebirth can he become the king, because “the primary source of a king’s power is his knowledge, which is based on experience of a particular kind, that is, the confrontation with, and survival of, death.”⁷⁴ For the hero this is not simply surviving his enemies; he “enters the jaws of death, and the jaws close.”⁷⁵

The figure of the hero is closely allied to that of the warrior, and both have a dangerous element that is implicit in masculinity. *The furor heroicus* transforms him into something non-human. Achilles is scarcely human in battle: he may be a god or he may be a monster, but he is not just a man. Images of fire surround him, because in the heat of battle he becomes a primordial force, divine, destroying.⁷⁶ The Irish hero CuChulain becomes, “horrible, many-shaped and unrecognizable.”⁷⁷ Like Grendel, Beowulf is *gebolgen*, swollen larger than life⁷⁸ and is monstrous, *aglaeca*⁷⁹; indeed Grendel is almost a monstrous double of Beowulf.⁸⁰ These are not just literary devices. The transformations of man in war are known in every culture. In New Guinea, Gilbert Lewis was told of “men who went into a trance” in war; they were “dangerous, unreliable, deaf to calls or appeals.”⁸¹ The ordinary man, even apart from battle, is often dangerous to his society, because the forces set loose by the ideology of masculinity may destroy the society. Aggression may rage unchecked, and may provoke attack from foreign powers too strong to resist, or provoke internal wars that destroy the commonwealth. David Gilmore is too sanguine in his description of the ideology of masculinity: the chroniclers of civil wars, from those that destroyed the Roman Republic to those that brought down the Icelandic Commonwealth in the thirteenth century (not to mention more recent horrors), have testified to the destructiveness of aggression, even when it exists within the “normal” range that is deliberately cultivated in a society.

Despite all its problems and tendencies to self-destruction, masculinity is essential to the survival of any society that faces challenges. Men must be warned against the dangerous attractions of the safe, feminine world, so that they will accept the task of being masculine. Males must be trained to struggle, suffer, and die so that

the life of the community can go on. This self-sacrifice is a form of self-transcendence that has captured the imagination of almost all cultures. The gods at their noblest reflect something of the glory of the hero. Monotheistic religions emerged from societies that had ideologies of masculinity, and this ideology served as a means of explaining what God was and what he wanted men to be. The Jews lived in a corner of the world, the Middle East, that has for millennia been the scene of conflict. They had to develop an ideology of masculinity to survive, and that ideology can be found in what Christians call the Old Testament. It is to this text, as an anthropological and literary source, that I shall now turn.