

*This was a paper read to the British Psychological Society annual conference at York, 1976.*

## References

2. New Society April 3, 1975
  3. Re Issues May 6, 1975
- 

David Porter

# A Healthy Effeminacy

Chambers's Etymological Dictionary defines effeminacy as 'the possession of a womanish softness and weakness' and 'indulgence in unmanly pleasures.' Collins's Contemporary Dictionary defines it as 'display, on the part of a man, of characteristics usually associated with women only.' In our study of effeminacy we must therefore take into account positive and negative gender-roles, i.e. what is considered masculine and what is considered feminine.

When we begin to analyse gender-roles and to understand how these are reinforced by the mass media, education and religious instruction, we uncover many of the hidden and partially hidden assumptions about what kinds of behaviour are appropriate to either of the sexes. Such oppressive gender-roles are determined by the society in which we find ourselves. For example, there were women-bullfighters in Ancient Greece and perfumed, outrageously-dressed 'dandies' in Eighteenth Century England. In modern western society, there are certain professions where 'feminine' behaviour by men is permitted, such as hairdressing, ballet dancing and acting. It is understood that behaviour which might normally be severely enjoined against is considered 'acceptable' because such professions involve much emphasis upon personal creativity. Thus an actor can 'get away with' painting himself and behaving flamboyantly simply because he is an actor.

Opinions are divided on the subject of effeminacy. Like transvestism and transexuality, it is calculated to arouse prejudice and hostility in many otherwise fair-minded people, both heterosexual and homosexual. Indeed, one wonders why male effeminacy is included in discussions on male homosexuality at all, since there are many effeminate men who make good and faithful husbands and fathers and who give no evidence of homosexual tendencies, just as there are many homosexual men whose personalities bear no traces of effeminacy.

In the gay movement, male effeminacy is accepted by some and hated by others. The latter generally adopt the argument that effeminate gays draw attention to themselves by their 'camp' behaviour and that this gives gay people a bad name! In a recent issue of 'Gay News' I asked, 'why is there such a dislike of effeminacy in men? Does our

male chauvinism make us believe that effeminate men are somehow letting the side down? what is wrong with 'campness', or for that matter 'butchness' in gay women?' I added that in my opinion effeminacy can be a healthy protest against the sexism that is rampant in our society.

Men are permitted to be the decision-makers and the thinkers of society; however, they are not supposed to be in touch with their feelings since these get in the way of performance. Men who permit themselves to have feelings run the risk of being labelled 'cowards', 'sissies' or 'queers'. Nor are they allowed to be nurturing and protective towards children for fear of being labelled 'pedophile'. The care of the sick, the elderly and the disabled is considered 'women's work', unless, of course, the man can be the boss such as a surgeon or doctor. A male nurse (note that we must include the word 'male') may be accused of taking on a job that is really second-best, a job that is more appropriate to a woman.

Women, however, are permitted to be effeminate, and many develop mannerisms which are considerably affected and may get in the way of performance as, for example, the woman who will not take part in certain activities such as swimming lest she ruin her hair. Indeed, such mannerisms may be considered by her family and friends as being 'charming' and 'delightful'. If a man adopts exactly the same mannerisms he is likely to arouse hostility in others, both women and men, both straight and gay. Society allows women to be effeminate, but not men!

In my analysis of effeminacy amongst men, I distinguish between *comic effeminacy*, which can be fun, and *sarcastic effeminacy*, which is bitchy and creative of ill feeling. I believe that comic effeminacy is natural and healthy, an honest expression of personality. Effeminate men can sometimes be good company, and not a few can be the life and soul of a party! The fact that they *are* effeminate does not mean that they are any less human beings, perhaps more so in that many are sensitive, nurturing and co-operative men, unlike the stone-faced 'real man' depicted in films. Sarcastic effeminacy, on the other hand, is the realm of the woman-hater since, essentially, he is parodying women and thus ridiculing them. Certain drag artists adopt this line of attack, and their audiences may join them in deriding women's mannerisms.

There is, I believe, a third category of effeminacy, and that is *manipulative effeminacy*. Eric Berne, in his book 'Games People Play', describes the psychological game of 'Stupid' in which the player obtains certain social benefits by acting stupid. The thesis of the game is 'I laugh with you at my own clumsiness'; when the going gets rough though, the player may drop his mask and emerge as a sensible person who is not really stupid. Many films feature clown-like characters who eventually come out on top. The game of 'Effeminate' might be identified as a variant of 'Stupid' in that the player derives similar pay offs; his antics may encourage others to take responsibility for him and to not pressurise him into any heroics. Thus the 'Effeminate' player does not need to prove himself by means of physical strength and brute force, or by means of outwitting the next man as is common in men's self-oppression. Perhaps it is in his refusal to be a 'real man' that his real power lies. Perhaps we should look more closely at what an effeminate man *is*, rather than what he *ought to be*. Comments on this subject will be welcomed by the author.

---