Masculinity in Crisis

Roger Horrocks

The main thesis of the book from which this article is extracted is a simple paradox: patriarchal masculinity cripples men. Manhood as we know it in our society requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life, that the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half human. Jeff Hearn states this poignantly in his book *The Gender of Oppression*: 'We men are formed and broken by our own power'.

This is the constant threnody I hear from those men who come to see me in therapy: to become the man I was supposed to be, I had to destroy my most vulnerable side, my sensitivity, my femininity, my creativity, and I also had to pretend to be both more powerful and less powerful than I feel. But these men are fortunate — they have gone into a profound crisis, some of them a breakdown, from which they have a good chance of emerging enlarged, more alive, more self-accepting. There are surely many others who struggle on (manfully!), confused, afraid, wondering if there are others who feel the same.

This is the cryptic message of masculinity: don't accept who you are. Conceal your weakness, your tears, your fear of death, your love for others. Conceal your impotence. Conceal your potency. Disparage women, since they remind you too much of your own feminine side. Disparage gay men since that's too near the bone as well. Fake your behaviour. Dominate others, then you can fool everyone, especially yourself, that you feel powerful.

One of the important ways of looking at gender is as a power relationship: men have oppressed women and children and other men for thousands of years by virtue of being men. To be a man has been a qualification in itself for many privileged positions.

But sometimes in feminism we find a rather simplistic syllogism that begins with the empowerment of the male gender and the oppression of the female gender

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and concludes that women are damaged, and men are exalted, privileged. Lynne Segal describes masculinity as 'the exciting identity, linked with success, power and dominance in every social sphere'.

There is no doubt about male dominance in public areas of life. We look around and see male judges, male policemen, male politicians, male surgeons, male priests. The exception — Margaret Thatcher — proves the rule. We see men consistently earning more than women, employed in better, more skilled jobs. Women are often employed in part-time non-unionised jobs, where job security and conditions are rock-bottom. Men dominate in areas such as the arts, the media, education.

But I want to make a more complex claim: that men and women have actually demarcated out different zones of influence in life, where one predominates, and where the other is deprived. My thesis is that men are economically and politically powerful, and that women are emotionally powerful. Of course it can be argued that economic power far outstrips emotional power, and is somehow determining, more valuable, more dignified. Interestingly this is a Marxist idea: that the economic 'base' of society ultimately determines the cultural 'super-structure'.

The point I am making is that the emphasis on male dominance in public areas of life has tended to obscure the emotional poverty of many men's lives.

Let me move from generalisations to some specific examples. A fictional example: D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*. There is little doubt that this is an autobiographical novel, and it is psychologically very convincing.

In *Sons and Lovers* the central family are the Morels. Mr Morel is a miner, and clearly is the one with the money, which he doles out to Mrs Morel, if he is not spending it at the pub. Thus Mrs Morel is dependent on him financially, and is in a weak state in this sense. But emotionally, psychologically, the tables are turned. Mr Morel is a shadow of a man, whereas Mrs Morel is an immensely powerful woman. She is so powerful, that she overshadows everyone in the family, and dominates her sons, so much so that their own identity is threatened. The central thread of the novel is Paul's attempt to become free of her, an attempt whose resolution is left in a highly ambivalent stage at the end of the novel.

Here is a typical section in the novel where Mrs Morel turns away from her husband to the children, after he has been ill: 'There was the halt, the wistfulness about the ensuing year, which is like autumn in a man's life. His wife was casting him off, half regretfully, but relentlessly; casting him off and turning now for love and life to the children. Henceforward he was more or less a husk. And he half acquiesced, as so many men do, yielding their place to their children.'

Sons and Lovers is a brilliantly realised novel, and I would argue that it represents a common situation in working class and middle class families. There is a division of labour: the man earns the money, and in that sense has economic power and dominance; the woman runs the family, not just in a practical sense, that is, cooking, washing and so on, but emotionally. She is the ring-leader of the whole family in the psychological arena. Indeed in *Sons*

and Lovers her power is so great that her sons are castrated and suffocated by her William is engaged to be married, but cannot endure the conflict between mother and wife-to-be and dies. Paul becomes her surrogate lover and father, and in turn feels incapacitated with women of his own age.

Thus we have the pattern of the father who is emotionally distant, weak and damaged; and the mother who is emotionally powerful, and sometimes too powerful. Working as a psychotherapist I hear this complaint so often: my father was so remote, I never knew him. Alix Pirani has written a book on the subject: *The Absent Father*.

In her book on men, Mary Ingham describes the pattern in her own family: 'It was only after my mother died that I began to realise how much they had functioned as a symbiotic whole, of which my mother was the emotional, demonstratively affectionate half, the one who wrote letters, rang up. A letter from my father always meant that my mother was too ill to write, and he had hardly ever rang me in his life. If financially my mother had always depended on my father, emotionally my father had always existed through her.'

That is both an eloquent and a precise description of the reciprocal symbiosis which many marriages become: each partner lives through the other in a certain area of life. We might say that in our culture there is a visible patriarchy — the economic and social dominance of men over women — and an invisible matriarchy, the emotional dominance of women over men.

A very interesting Victorian example is found in a biographical sketch by John Tosh of a nineteenth century Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward White Benson. Benson's eldest son died at the age of seventeen, and the relation between Benson and his wife changed: 'Mary's role for the remaining eighteen years of the marriage was now set. The memories of the younger sons, Arthur and Fred, were of their father's total reliance on her ability to soothe his irritation and relieve his black depressions. The partnership became more harmonious because Mary was able — like a mother — to intuit her husband's unarticulated emotional needs and to regulate the emotional equilibrium of the household. Benson's dependence on his wife was of course less visible than his patriarchal authority, not least because it was at variance with the ethos of manly independence. But it was no less real for that, and was surely the underpinning of his public posture of command and self-reliance.'

Here is a man who achieved great public office, mixed with prime ministers and other grandees, and yet, in this brilliant little portrait of a marriage, we see Benson as a child, comforted by a wife-mother, who intuits his 'unarticulated emotional needs' — presumably Benson was unconsciously trying to find in his wife something that he was deprived of as a child. The patriarchal outward persona is belied by the child-like dependence on his wife — this might be called the secret underbelly of Victorian masculinity, and surely of twentieth century masculinity. In a rather pathetic way, the man lives through the woman emotionally, as presumably she lives through his public success.

Another revealing facet to Benson's private life is given in the same essay in the description of his relationship with his sons. Tosh describes how Benson preserved a stiff distance from them, often censorious and cold (whereas in fact he loved them deeply, as is revealed in his diaries). His three sons eventually found a niche in the homosexual subculture of the early twentieth century. Thus the 'absence' of fathers has considerable emotional repercussions for their children — in Benson's case we could argue that his sons were compelled to search for that male love that they didn't get from him.

My final example in this section is taken from anthropology. The American anthropologist Stanley Brandes studied the men and women in a Spanish town, and found the characteristic Mediterranean divide between public space, dominated by men. and domestic space, which women inhabit. But Brandes also noticed that the men were afraid and in awe of the women: 'The male ideological posture accords considerable superiority to women. It is an ideology that reverses the actual state of affairs that exists in the realm of actual behaviour. Women are portrayed as dangerous and potent.'

And Brandes spends some time describing how this male attitude is expressed, in informal statements, codified folklore, and idiomatic expressions, for example: Pueden mas dos tetas que cien carretas (two breasts can do more than a hundred carts). And there are a whole range of beliefs that express this male fear of female power, to do with menstruation, the evil eye, female sexuality, the fear of anal penetration and so on.

But the kernel of Brandes' article is this: 'Why do [the men] portray themselves ideologically as potentially vulnerable and weak, and women as hostile and aggressive? Why do they assume a psycho-logically defensive position when their appropriate behavioural role is assertive?

Brandes considers various explanations, ranging from historical factors, psychoanalytic projections, rationalisations of patriarchal oppression (the myth of female power justifies controlling them), but concludes that the 'women really are hostile and powerful'.

This analysis of a Spanish town is rather similar to my own sense of the working class culture I grew up in: the men politically control the women, yet see them as very powerful. And my own intuitions match Brandes' analysis: the women really were powerful. Brandes relates this partly to the importance that sexual honour has in Andalusian culture, and the perceived power of female sexuality, but I think he neglects the role women play in family structure, in the expression of emotion, in personal relationship. The public/private divide relates to more than the plaza and the kitchen, or in the culture I grew up in, the pub and the kitchen. The public domain also concerns the outward front that people adopt; the private domain includes the innermost feelings that men and women possess, but which are not publicly revealed. My thesis is that these two great territories of human existence are apportioned to men and women respectively, and this causes great conflict and envy between the sexes in many cultures. Significantly in Brandes' Andalusian town it is considered unmanly for men to go to church frequently — the affairs of the soul belong to women.

Further Reading

Jeff Hearn, *The Gender of Oppression*, Wheatsheaf Books, 1987

Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, Virago Press, 1990

D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, Penguin, 1962

Alix Pirani, *The Absent Father: Crisis and Creativity*, Penguin Arkana, 1989

Mary Ingham, *Men: The Male Myth Exposed*, Century Publishing, 1985

John Tosh, 'Domesticity and Manliness in the Victorian Middle Class,' in M. Roper and J. Tosh (eds.) *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, Routledge, 1991

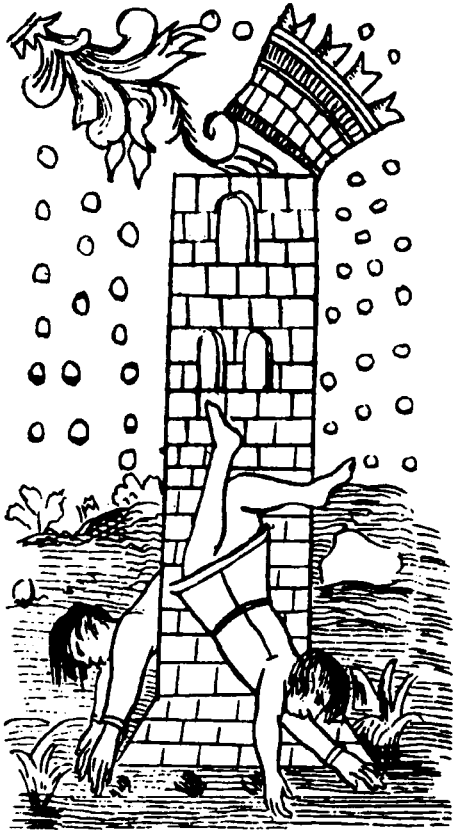
Stanley Brandes, 'Like Wounded Stags: Male Sexual Ideology in an Andalusian Town', in S. B. Ortner and H. Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, CUP, 1981

Working with the Tarot

Anne Whitaker

I see the tarot as one of the great 'feminine' arts, along with astrology, palmistry, the *I Ching* and numerology. They all offer symbolic ways of reaching into the intuitive levels of human experience wherein lies a great source of potential wisdom and guidance in how to lead our lives as consciously and as fully as possible.

These arts also show us that we are not separate beings, random accidents in time and space. We are connected to the web of life emotionally, physically and spiritually. Lack of a sense of meaningful connection to a greater whole underpins the profound sense of impotence so many people feel today, as all the structures which used to provide us with the illusion of a secure and ordered world fragment and gradually collapse.



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