Rausing, Sigrid. "Men of Tin (1991)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 209–215. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-026>>.

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26. Men of Tin (1991)

Sigrid Rausing

In *Iron John: A Book about Men*, the poet Robert Bly tells us that

When a father now sits down at the table, he seems weak and insignificant, and we all sense that fathers no longer fill as large a space in the room as nineteenth-century fathers did. Some welcome this, but without understanding all its implications. These events have worked to hedge the father around with his own paltriness. D. H. Lawrence said: 'Men have been depressed now for many years in their male and resplendent selves, depressed into dejection and almost abjection. Is that not evil?' (p. 98)

If you are a man, and if you agree with Bly that men have become weak, insignificant, paltry, depressed into dejection and (almost) abjection, you are probably a masculinist. This phenomenon is the latest manifestation of American identity politics. After two decades of the most recent feminist wave, men are writing books about their oppression—not about having to repress their more tender feelings, but about how men are forced to repress their 'natural' masculinity: about men's emasculation. Writers use the language of essentialist feminism to express this oppression: they like talking about the mystical differences between men and women. They don't, of course, have to rely on nebulous matriarchies in the distant past: the not-so-distant past, as they like to point out, was a state of glorious and healthy patriarchy.

Robert Bly's authority on this subject derives from his workshops for men, where a lot of drumming, brandishing of swords and mock-fighting goes on to promote male affirmation, and where the existential pain of American men became apparent to him. A year ago in the US he published *Iron John*: this immensely popular book (it spent 40 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list) has since become one of the fundamental texts of the masculinist movement. It was published in Britain in September 1991.

Bly's argument is that men in industrialized societies have become emasculated: they are no longer 'real men'. He uses one of the fairytales collected by the Grimm brothers, 'Iron John', to indicate stage by stage precisely what is wrong with American men and, by extension, American mothers who have let them grow up

that way. The hero of the story is a little prince who helps Iron John, a kind of hairy, monstrous giant, to escape from the castle where he is imprisoned. He goes with him into the forest, where various significant events happen; he leaves and becomes a kitchen boy in the castle of another king; he rescues the land from the enemy with the help of Iron John, and is given the king's daughter in marriage as a reward. Iron John is thereby freed from his enchantment and returns to *his* former identity as a king. Bly analyses these stages in some detail from a Jungian-poetic-mythical point of view.

American men, according to Bly, are in a bad way. Industrialisation tore the father away from the home, leaving the son to the mercies of the mother who is then free to 'indoctrinate' the boy to believe that the father, and by extension masculinity, is bad. Without the father's protection, this can lead to a form of 'psychic incest' between mother and son: 'Much sexual energy', Bly reveals, 'can be exchanged when the mother looks the son directly in the eyes and says, "here is your new T-shirt, all washed"' (p. 185). Industrialisation and popular culture have destroyed the 'heart connections' men had with each other, and undermined the respect they deserve from the rest of the community. 'Zeus energy', 'male authority accepted for the sake of the community' is (regrettably) in decline. Bly blames the entertainment industry:

Many young Hollywood writers, rather than confront their fathers in Kansas, take revenge on the remote father by making all adult men look like fools. They attack the respect for masculine integrity that every father, underneath, wants to pass on to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. (p. 23)

Eventually, however, 'a man needs to throw off all indoctrination and begin to discover for himself what the father is and what masculinity is'. It takes a long time to reach that stage, but

Somewhere around 40 or 45 a movement towards the father takes place naturally — a desire to see him more clearly and to draw closer to him. This happens unexplainably, almost as if on a biological timescale. (p. 25)

Jung and D. H. Lawrence provide much of the intellectual basis of the book and its theory of men's loss of manliness. Bly describes Lawrence's analysis of what happened to men's values after the introduction of compulsory education where, significantly, 'the teachers are mostly women':

The children of his generation deduced that their fathers had been doing something wrong all along, that men's physical work is wrong and that those sensitive mothers who prefer white curtains and an elevated life are right and always have been. (p. 20)

The industrial revolution produced soft men, 'sanitised, hairless and shallow'; men who were not only indoctrinated by women but who also in some senses became like women. These men, apparently, are becoming increasingly passive and naive, endangering their masculinity (with its inherent qualities of activity and wisdom). They can't fight back when women attack them because they lack 'natural brutality'.

The 'active man' has been strangled by industrial society. 'During the last 30 years', says Bly, 'men have been asked to follow rather than lead, to live in a non-hierarchical way, to be vulnerable, to adopt consensus decision-making' (p. 61). Bly himself is no admirer of consensus. He tells of a young man in one of his audiences who was disturbed by the important point in the myth of Iron John that a key had to be stolen from under the mother's pillow:

'Robert, I am disturbed by this idea of stealing the key. Stealing isn't right. Couldn't a group of us just go to the mother and say, 'Mom, could I have the key back?'. His model was probably consensus, the way the staff at the health food store settles things. I felt the souls of all the women in the room rise up in the air to kill him. Men like that are as dangerous to women as they are to men. (p. 12)

Myth and instinct

Myths, Bly theorises, are vehicles for instinctual knowledge. Expressing 'nature' rather than 'culture', myths are, so to speak, transcendently true: a truth to which 'primitive' people have a live and organic connection. 'Modern people', on the other hand, are alienated from these myths; but they can still be helped by them. When a man gets to the point when his biological timetable tells him he needs to throw off his mother's indoctrination, the reading of myths will encourage his budding sense of manhood:

For that task, ancient stories are a good help, because they are free of modern psychological prejudices, because they have endured the scrutiny of generations of women and men, and because they give both the light and dark sides of manhood, the admirable and the dangerous. (p.25)

The mythical/mystical movement to which Bly's theories belong has had a certain amount of bad press by association with Nazi ideology, but it is now being resurrected in the New Age movement. This is also where Bly is coming from. He elevates myths to the level of holy texts, expressing meanings which transcend individual cultures. They are external to history, belonging to the realm of the collective unconscious or, in Bly's vocabulary, the instinctual. This is inevitably reductionist, but perhaps more importantly, it excludes the possibility of making a critical analysis of the texts. The archaic power structures in the myths are seen as part of a natural, pre-given pattern from which we have deviated. Any criticisms in terms of power are easily dismissed as neurotic anxiety: an inability to come to terms with yourself as a 'real woman' or a 'real man'.

This bizarre advocacy of myths as guides to life opens up the question of what myths actually are. In my view, they are simply stories which have gained a certain amount of charisma by having been around for a long time. The reasons for their longevity are complex, and are connected with the development of the 19th century antiquarian movement, in which Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm were the most important figures. To simplify somewhat: the urban bourgeoisie developed a sense of apartness from the rural peasantry, which could then be objectified by being investigated in various ways. The collection of myths by the Grimm brothers was very much part of that process, as was the development of ethnography and the establishment of ethnographic museums towards the end of the 19th century. The origins of the myths became controversial, but it is by no means clear that they are, in fact, particularly ancient. The Freudian psychoanalytic approach regarded fairy-tales and myths as racial dreams externalising unfulfilled wishes and unconscious desires. Jung took this a step further, with the theory of cultural transcendent archetypes which constitute our innate psychological make-up. This, more or less, is the approach that Bly follows, with the added veneer of 'masculinism' — feminism turned upside down.

Oppressed men?

Masculinists, like feminists before them, are trying to find a voice to express their feelings of oppression. There is, however, a difference between *feeling* oppressed and *being* oppressed. Arguably, within the ideology of western individualism, we must all be oppressed to a degree. The development of psychology in conjunction with individualism has led to a situation where, theoretically, there are no limits to oppression, if oppression is defined as any obstruction to individual self-fulfilment. In discourse on power and oppression, therefore, it is important to refer

to objective measurements. Bly confuses oppression with loss of power: men in his view are oppressed by the system of industrialism because that system has dismantled patriarchal modes of being, and inhibited the expression of 'natural' male domination.

Bly has become a kind of high priest of the myth-oriented men's movement, and it's a movement which is spreading fast. In the US the television personality Bill Moyers has done much to popularise it, initially in a six-hour long interview with Joseph Campbell, 'The Power of Myth with Bill Moyers', and later through interviews with Bly and Sam Keen, the author of *Fire in the Belly: on Being a Man*. These shows are some of the most popular Bill Moyers has ever done: according to the *New Republic*, the interview with Joseph Campbell attracted 30 million viewers.

The men's movement, however, also has a more sinister edge. The US National Coalition of Free Men publish a journal called *Transitions*; four months after the Canadian student Marc Lepine shot 14 women students dead in Montreal, screaming, 'You're all a bunch of feminists! I hate feminists!', they published an article stating that Lepine had been misunderstood and that 'in their relentless pursuit of "emancipation", perhaps many women did make life more difficult for him'. About 40,000 American men are believed to be active in organisations like this, which purport to defend 'men's rights'.

As a movement, masculinism is post-New Age, coming from a philosophy of extreme relativism where external realities, and particularly external political realities, are seen as unimportant compared to one's own 'Inner Journey'. The 'inner life' is the arena in which the oppression of men is supposedly played out. Bly's notion of 'psychic incest' is matched by Sam Keen in the second chapter of *Fire in the Belly*, 'It's a WOMAN's world'. Subheadings are: 'Man's Unconscious Bondage to WOMAN', 'WOMAN as GODDESS and Creatrix', 'Woman as Mother and Matrix', 'WOMAN as Erotic-Spiritual Power', 'Saying Good-bye to WOMAN'.

Feminists write about oppression that is particular to women. Masculinists, on the other hand, tend to follow the time-honoured male tradition of confusing men and Man, and writing about human difficulties in western societies as if they were specific to men. Likewise, in an easy reversal of essentialist feminist claims, the masculinists proudly assert that history is, literally, man-made. In Sam Keen's account, women feature merely as part of the nature that men triumphantly conquered:

Without the historical introduction of the notion of a transcendent God who ordered his subjects to name the animals and to have dominion over the

earth, neither individualism nor empirical science and technology would have developed. Life in the garden of the goddess was harmonious but the spirit of history called for man to stand up and take charge. Now, centuries later, after we have been inundated by the tragedy of warfare and sickened by the side effects of irresponsible science and runaway technology, it is easy to forget the triumph of that moment when men rebelled against their fate, threw off their passivity, and declared: Thank you, Mother, but I can do it myself. (p. 96).

Yes, indeed.

The feminist version of the same story, which laments rather than celebrates that moment of triumph, is contemptuously dismissed:

The mythology of ideological feminism (*sic*) goes something like this: Once upon a gentle time we all dwelt harmoniously within the garden of the goddess. In those days life was organised around feminine values — co-operation, sensitivity, nurturance, sharing. ...Then...came the barbarian hordes of horsemen armed with swords sweeping into the peaceful agrarian, matrifocal cultures of India, Old Europe, Asia. They brought with them fierce and vengeful male gods — Zeus, Yahweh and Allah (*sic*) — a warrior ethic, the habit of holy war, and a masculine mind that was henceforth to divide and conquer everything in its path — empires, women and the atom. And the most disastrous of masculine inventions was technology itself, which gradually allowed men to conquer and destroy nature herself.

‘This ...theory of history’, he sums up, ‘renders men responsible for all of the ills of society, and women innocent’ (p.198-99).

Masculinism, then, is very much the flipside of essentialist feminism. Its advocates like to point to the ‘mysterious’ differences between the genders, and the ‘natural’ leadership of men. Despite the fact that men apparently single-handedly created western civilisation, women mustn’t blame them for the less attractive attributes of that civilisation. This is an ‘existential and moral fallacy’, says Keen, fuelled by ‘simplistic sexist moralism’.

There is an element of fundamentalism in all this—a supreme disregard of facts, social and historical, leading to a grossly simplistic explanation of the world and what went wrong with it. For the masculinists it’s the psychological rather than the personal which is political; the logic which says that, ultimately, we are all victims. The pop-psychological-spiritual view sees humankind as an endless queue of

individuals, painfully working through their ostensibly quite trivial wounds on the path to feel-good perfection.

It is within that logic—the logic of oppression as self-repression—that men are regarded as oppressed. It is an irony of history that this should be expressed in the vocabulary of essentialist feminism. The two movements could now fuse, in fact are now fusing, in a blissful New Age union, where the men happily learn to be Men again, strong and wise, and the women to be Women, loving and nurturing. I'm sure the men, at least, will love it.

References

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