

What Do Men Want? A Reading List For the Male Identity Crisis

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THE finger of feminist accusation has been pointed at many different parts of the male anatomy, but the favorite objects of scorn are man's robotic brain, his granite heart and that thing between his legs. Men are defective: brutal, competitive, exploitative, insensitive, disconnected from meaningful social relationships, out of touch with their feelings and oblivious to things they do not want to hear. It is impossible to get them to do housework, even when they are unemployed. Why not simply replace the unit? They just lie around and make noise. Feeding them is an act of charity. Or so the indictment goes.

Recently some oblivious insensitive men have begun to notice that feminists don't like them. A few have even made New Year's resolutions to reinvent themselves into new males. A crisis literature on male identity has burst onto the scene, featuring titles like "The End of Manhood," "Myths of Masculinity," "Not Guilty" and "Why Men Hate Women." Men, largely white, middle-class, middle-aged men, M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s, storytellers and drumbeaters, camp counselors and boys' school teachers, members of "Hairy-Chested Men's Groups" and former gang members, fire walkers and holistic healers are writing earnest, heartfelt, even sentimental books about what it means to be a man, with all sorts of heroic recommendations about how to become one. Sticks and stones may break your bones, but when it comes to male-bashing (or defending) it is words that sell.

I have just read a dozen books from the male identity crisis literature. The genre emerged in the late 1980's, a long-delayed response to 20 years of feminist critique. It gained some notoriety in 1990 with the publication of "Iron John: A Book About Men," Robert Bly's antidote to masculine soul loss. The success of Mr. Bly's book of Wild Man writings (62 weeks on the New York Times hard-cover best-seller list) virtually guaranteed that bass and tenor voices would soon appear on the gender studies stage. Oblivious males generally become alert when there is a chance to profit from a crisis.

Unlike much of the feminist literature, which is unified by its sense of moral outrage over the historical subordination and exploitation of women by men, the men's crisis literature is unified by a sense of ontological anxiety: in a post-modern world lacking clear-cut borders and distinctions, it has become hard to know what it means to be a man and even harder to feel good about being one.

The unity in both literatures is more apparent than real. After a couple of exciting decades of internecine warfare, the women's movement has lost its ruby slippers. Feminist discourse is now fractured in so many ways that the specific implications of being a feminist are far from clear. There are ideological fault lines dividing liberal feminists (who argue that men and women are essentially alike), ecological feminists and goddess worshippers (who argue that men and women are essentially different and that women should be free to cultivate and take advantage of their femininity) and deconstructive feminists (who argue that nothing is essentially anything and everything is essentially accidental). Not to be outdone, the men's crisis literature has promoted so many different kinds of voices in only three years that the barbaric phrase "speaking as a 'masculinist'" has in record time lost any determinate meaning.

There are writers who embrace one version or

Richard A. Shweder, an anthropologist and a professor of human development at the University of Chicago, is working on a new book, to be entitled "Why Do Men Barbecue? And Other Essays in Cultural Psychology."

another of feminist critique. Men are incomplete. Self-sufficiency is not tenable. Forget the Marlboro man. Let's get in touch with our feelings and get reconnected in dense relationships. Having gone to school on feminist denunciations of patriarchy, writers like William G. Doty, a professor of humanities at the University of Alabama, in **MYTHS OF MASCULINITY** (Crossroad, \$24.95), and R. William Betcher and William S. Pollack, a psychiatrist and a psychologist, respectively, at McLean Hospital and

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Harvard Medical School and co-authors of **IN A TIME OF FALLEN HEROES: The Re-Creation of Masculinity** (Atheneum, \$22.50), offer us nuanced views about ways, as Mr. Doty puts it, to change the "shapes of masculinity" for the better.

THE END OF MANHOOD: A Book for Men of Conscience (Dutton, \$21) actually recommends we bring manhood to an end. Its author, John Stoltenberg, a writer in New York and a co-founder of Men Against Pornography, argues that the essential self, the authentic self, the really real self has no genitals. The alternative view, argued in **BOYS WILL BE MEN: Masculinity in Troubled Times** (Paul S. Eriksson, \$19.95), by Richard A. Hawley, headmaster of University School in Cleveland, is that gender cuts very deep into the soul. That, one might suspect, is why even the gods have males and females.

Other writers huff and puff and posture defiantly at the perilous feminist horde. One such is David Thomas, the former editor of Punch magazine in England, in **NOT GUILTY: The Case in Defense of**

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Men (Morrow, \$20). Another is Warren Farrell, a former board member of the National Organization for Women who has had a change of heart, in **THE MYTH OF MALE POWER: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex** (Simon & Schuster, \$23). They defend the flag of manhood, arguing from example that it is women who freeload on society and men who should be complaining. Have you heard, as Mr. Thomas asserts, that male models are underpaid, and that (according to Mr. Farrell) more men may be raped each year than women (it happens a lot in prisons)? And why should men be the ones who register for the draft? These authors want to stand toe to toe with their rivals, eager to trade indignation for indignation, injustice for injustice, and are desperate to keep score. They seem convinced that feminists and other high-status women will only be turned on by men who can beat them in arguments.

SOME writers respond to the feminist finger of accusation by suggesting that there really are things of value in men but they are all hidden from view. Robert Moore, a professor of psychology and religion at the Chicago Theological Seminary, and Douglas Gillette, a "mythologist" and leader of men's therapy groups, suggest in **THE LOVER WITHIN: Accessing the Lover in the Male Psyche (Morrow, \$25)** that the really good things have been locked up in some Jungian archetype (a sensitive lover, a spiritual warrior) but that they can be released by pressing the right buttons. According to Michael Sky, a holistic healer, teacher and fire-walking instructor who leads workshops in the United States and Japan and is the author of **SEXUAL PEACE: Beyond the Dominator Virus** (Bear & Company, paper, \$10.95), certain deep breathing exercises are highly recommended.

Others suggest that men are closely related to the divinities. If men gather together in a pride, honor their ancestral spirits, tell the right stories, beat the right drums and expose the right scars — their bruised egos and symbolic wounds — there will spring from the brow some godlet or hero, a Dionysus, an Odysseus, a King David, to lift the modern male out of gender confusion and into ontological certainty. Three hundred years into the

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Enlightenment, "neo-antiquarianism," mythopoetic narrative and ceremonial initiation are in vogue again: Michael Meade, storyteller, drummer, "festival maker," collaborator of Robert Bly and author of **MEN AND THE WATER OF LIFE: Initiation and the Tempering of Men** (HarperSanFrancisco, \$22), is a master of the mode.

I am reminded of the Turkana chief of northern Kenya, a man proud of his land, cattle and many wives, who sneered at his more modern college-educated cousin, a literate and worldly man with a civil service position (or was it an academic job?) in Nairobi. "I have land, cattle and four wives," said the chief. "What does my cousin have? Paper!"

I AM reminded as well of Benjamin Franklin's account of the words spoken by the elders of the Iroquois Confederacy in 1744, when they gracefully declined an offer by the colonists of Virginia to establish a college scholarship program for "savage lads." The elders responded: "Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the Northern Provinces: they were instructed in all your sciences: but when they came back to us they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy . . . they were totally good for nothing." Many writers in the men's crisis literature seem convinced that the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, the Masai warriors of East Africa and other folk with premodern sensibilities exceeds that of us moderns concerning the means and meanings of becoming a real man.

Various others think an evolutionary leap is about to take place in gender relations and that a "new male" is about to be born, or more precisely, "invented." They are, for the most part, happy about this. Kathleen Gerson, a professor of sociology at New York University, conducted interviews about the tension between work and family with middle-class men in New York City, most of them in their 30's. Judging from her erudite and scholarly sociological treatise, **NO MAN'S LAND: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work** (Basic Books, \$25), the great victory for American women is that they now have less leisure time. Ms. Gerson's ideal for the new male is an "involved male" who shares domestic responsibilities with his working wife. The man Ms. Gerson would like to design would be committed to equity in the "second shift" women work when they get home. She is not the only author who is hoping that the new male will turn out to be a *mensch*.

Her interviews, however, document the existence of another type of new male, the "autonomous male." "Autonomous males" seem to have concluded that it is just too burdensome and time-consuming to oppress, protect or even just cooperate with another sex. They much prefer to avoid entanglements with women and to live alone.

I am led to imagine another design for the new male, which might be described as the "reasonable male." The reasonable male, just like the reasonable female, accepts the critique advanced by some feminist legal scholars, that men and women have different brains. Put more cautiously, the reasonable male believes that what is reasonable for women is not the same as what is reasonable for men. The reasonable male then might conclude, for instance, that it is unreasonable, and certainly unfair, to be maneuvered into a hostile work environment where he is going to be judged by reasonable women. In his extreme form, he prefers to work with men.

John Stoltenberg, who thinks masculinity is loathsome and that we should get rid of it, might well judge this feminist idea of separate standards of rationality for men and women to be utter nonsense. He is a self-declared "radical profeminist" and his book, "The End of Manhood," is a kind of high-minded, well-intended utopian self-improvement manual full of diagrams, slogans, checklists, personal resolutions and conceptual potions for dissolving Iron John. His liberal ideal for the new male is a "man of conscience" (or more accurately a "person of conscience") who happens to be "born penised." Mr. Stoltenberg's new male is a kind of secularized version of Kant's transcendental ego, an

embodied categorical imperative, a neutered principle of justice and equality. He is able to reach beyond gender differences into the humanizing depths of everyone's gender-free soul. This new male, or "man of conscience," recognizes that in the choice between authentic self-realization and the realization of one's manhood, manhood must go. For Mr. Stoltenberg, manhood means possessiveness, domination, status competition and, of course, a pornographic mind. He claims that it is men's fear of other men that inhibits intimacy, reciprocity and justice.

Mr. Stoltenberg may be right that men have always feared other men, but these days many men can be found in some forest, away from work and family, fearlessly engaging in conversation with their male friends. Many are playing golf. Some are in men's groups. Some are beating drums in the woods. Some are on a spiritual quest in search of their fathers. For many authors in the crisis literature, the new male is not a renouncer of masculinity but rather its champion. He is able to distinguish strength from a need to exploit. He discerns that painful ordeals and tough tests of manhood are not forms of torture or abuse. He has gender pride. In "Men and the Water of Life," Michael Meade writes quite brilliantly about initiation, ordeal and the importance of scars and wounds. Initiation makes men mysterious, he argues, and in every ritual death there is an opening and the possibility of rebirth. Unfortunately it is not so clear that after a ritual death the new male is going to be reborn as a *mensch*.

Go into a bookstore and randomly sample readings from the male identity crisis literature, and you are likely to encounter a smorgasbord of images of the new



male and be witness to unrelated celebrations of disparate political values. You will find praise for what I would call the right-wing virtues (respect for elders, ancestor worship, sacrifice, loyalty to members of one's group). And you will find panegyrics to what I would call left-wing virtues (justice as equality, ecumenism, the rights of individuals). It seems certain that whatever the design for the new male, it is going to take two wings to create something that can fly.

How stylized — or substantive — are gender differences? Is it really possible to invent a new male? To answer this question I consulted my handy professional survey of "Subsistence Activities and Division of Labor by Sex in 224 Societies," from Roy D'Andrade's "Sex Differences and Cultural Institutions" in "The Development of Sex Differences" (Stanford University, 1966), edited by Eleanor Maccoby. I learned that in almost every society where such activities exist it is the men who hunt, herd, plow, make weapons and pursue sea mammals, and the women who gather berries, roots, nuts and seeds, make clothing and pottery and do the cooking. The preparation of drinks and narcotics can go either way.

Should you conclude from such evidence that some aspects of gender relations are conservative and naturally resistant to change? If you do you run the risk of being labeled an essentialist.

"Essentialism" is the idea that men (or women) are by nature (fill in the blank). It is a familiar idea. Men are strong, violent and well suited for the hostilities of the battlefield or prison. Women are nurturing and sympathetic and well suited to care for children and be guardians of the home. Nature (anatomy, neurology, genetics, hormones; temperament, anima) is destiny, and that sort of stuff. A variation on this view, based on the observation that women are permitted to

wear either pants or dresses, is that women do not have an essence, only men do.

In gender studies essentialism used to be an intellectual crime. In some intellectual circles it still is an unpardonable sin. Nevertheless, these days, even among feminists, there are oppositional voices — among them, some followers of Carol Gilligan — declaring that women are women, not men; that "mothering" is mothering and should not be called "parenting" and given away to men; that women are caring, sensitive and skillful in relationships with people (rather than with objects or abstract principles); and that women reason about moral issues differently from men, and better.

It is noteworthy, perhaps even revealing, that in the men's crisis literature essentialism never got established as a crime, although some authors, fearful of the accusation, seem to have nightmares that they will be misperceived as apologists for nature. Adam Jukes, for example, in **WHY MEN HATE WOMEN** (Free Association/Columbia University, \$32.50), argues that it is a universal fact of life that men are controlling and destructive and live in "a state of perpetual enmity towards women." Mr. Jukes, a psychotherapist at the London Men's Center in England, even suggests that the notion of creating a new male is a wish-fulfillment fantasy that won't succeed. But don't get me wrong, Mr. Jukes declares, I am not one of those wicked "essentialists." The culprit is early childhood experience. It is separation from mother that turns boys everywhere into phallic abusive male adults. Anatomy is not destiny. Weaning is.

Other authors are less defensive. In "Boys Will Be Men," Richard Hawley discerns a self-affirming trajectory to male experience, which begins with early separation from mother, continues with a separation from home in the service of a quest, and ends with the "developed capacity for solitude." He writes: "We don't have or acquire a gender; we are gendered. In our deepest beings, from the first, we are male or female. We discover this fact; we do not invent it."

THE antithesis of essentialism might be called "accidentalism." Accidentalists believe that the only natural difference between men and women is their sex (penised vs. vulvaed, as Mr. Stoltenberg would have it). All the rest is "gender," and when it comes to gender everything just gets made up. Each culture invents its own ideas about which sex cooks, cares for the children, initiates lovemaking, likes rough-and-tumble play, prefers floral scents, feels deep sympathy for starving Ethiopians, or excels at chess. According to the accidentalists, the sex typing of tasks, tastes and talents is not natural, self-evident or divinely given. Definitions of what it means to be a man (or a woman) change. Each historical epoch fashions its own definition. E. Anthony Rotundo, a teacher of history at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., notes in his treatise **AMERICAN MANHOOD: Transformations in Masculinity From the Revolution to the Modern Era** (Basic Books, \$25), that there have been times in the American past when women have been stereotyped as oversexed and men assigned custody of the home. For the truly overcommitted accidentalist, gender is not even skin deep. Let us hope that somewhere in between essentialism and accidentalism lies some common sense.

The cacophony of voices in the male identity crisis literature is merely a symptom of our times. For some men, especially those in their 40's who came of age in the era of the women's liberation movement, the last 25 years has been experienced as an extended initiation ceremony into manhood, carried out on a grand cultural scale. They have been hazed and teased by their women and roughed up in debate. The many boundaries and clear resonances of a gendered world built around the opposition of work and family — production versus reproduction, salaried work versus unsalaried, outdoors versus indoors, competitive versus cooperative, hard versus soft — have been blurred, and men have been told that the time has come for them to choose to be someone else.

At this point in the initiation ceremony, some respected elders of the tribe are supposed to show up and let you in on some deep secrets about what it means to really be a man. Unfortunately, in our post-modern society we have no respected tribal elders or deep secrets, only a male identity crisis literature, written largely by men in their 40's who are groping around in the dark for their dignity. □