

MASCULINITY AS MASQUERADE

What follows is an improvised reaction to the essays in this issue of *JAPA* on the theme of masculinity. It is intended as a way both of reflecting back upon, and of continuing, the fascinating, polyphonic exchanges these essays have established.

In the Hollywood summer flick *Nacho Libre*, the main character, the hilariously unfit Jack Black, assumes a secret identity, affecting the costumed excesses of a caped, macho street wrestler. By day a menial in a monastery, by night he wants to win matches, money, and a woman. In the film's signature moment, Black reassures his protégé, a young boy who has spotted him surreptitiously dressing up, that "it's okay because sometimes a man just goes into his room and puts on stretchy pants and has a lot of fun." This declaration is meant to mollify the boy's uncomprehending, and suspicious, gaze, to reassure him that his adored older friend, regardless of the stretchy pants, and what used to be the forbidden "feminine" posturing in front of a mirror, remains what he always was: the incarnation of an admirable, straightforward masculinity.

It seems to me that many of us contemporary psychoanalysts occupy a position resembling that of the astonished boy of *Nacho Libre*. We often can feel ourselves located slightly behind the femininity/masculinity curve, waiting to see what's next, readying ourselves for the necessary adjustments. Over the past few decades, for example, we've been bombarded with well-warranted correctives—from heterosexual feminists, from gays, from lesbians—to what, in retrospect, now seem our outmoded ways of interpreting femininity and masculinity and the bedrock on which they seemed to stand.

We are therefore likely to feel less certain of our old claim to occupy femininity/masculinity's leading theoretical edge. Our position on that edge was bequeathed us by many of Freud's still radical insights.

For instance, were one of us to have written, today, in the wake of *Nacho Libre*, that “we are thus warned to loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between [drive] and object. It seems probable that the sexual [drive] is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object’s attractions” (Freud 1905, p. 148) we could respond to Black’s antic posturing with a confident indifference to whatever particular masquerade he might, for the moment, be celebrating. We would come to the boy’s assistance in defense of his spontaneous skepticism, a fundamental epistemological attitude once integral to psychoanalytic thought—what Paul Ricoeur (1970) so deftly referred to as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 27).

But our place in the culture is not what it once was. Chastened and less confident, we have in general become, I think, proportionately less suspicious and more credulous. For now, Black’s character seems to have the upper hand. Both mainstream and marginal cultural forces steadily serve to remind us, as though we’ve lost our once quick wit, that in pursuit of a winning version of masculinity what just moments ago had to be repudiated can, and even should, now be embraced. Straight/masculine men are fully sanctioned to put on their stretchy pants and have a lot of fun.

For the moment, let us take that fun and those stretchy pants as a single metonym linked to all emerging masculinities. The metonym is meant to figure any and all of the elements that an ever receding, ever surpassed, always anachronistic, old-fashioned masculinity was, in its ascendant moment, compelled to repudiate. No longer repudiating what their predecessors had to repudiate, these emerging masculinities are then, by self-definition, freer masculinities.

Nacho libre applauds an emerging masculinity that, in having fun with stretchy pants, is repudiating its previous repudiations. The film pokes fun at men still retrograde enough to take seriously, and to still repudiate, yesterday’s repudiations. With this, the film, and its hero, make their advance into history. They move forward; they turn themselves contemporary. This, I think, is the organizing tactic characteristic of all emerging masculinities: the repudiation of the repudiations of their predecessors. (Crucial to notice in this tactic is that the strategy of repudiation, per se, is not repudiated. Masculine identities remain tied to successful acts of repudiation—masculinity’s leading edge rids itself of suddenly devalued erotic currencies while taking on suddenly valued ones: stretchy pants, say.)

What are we to make of this emerging stretchy-panted figure—still masculine, but now the object of our uncertain gaze, and with that gaze, like Black's protégé, perhaps also of our uncertain identifications? How can we figure out a reliable way to think about this figure: him or it? More pertinently still, how can we figure out a way to listen to him—to do something other than merely believe or disbelieve him tout court, when he says, with a wink, that our once shared problem with stretchy pants no longer exists; that he has, as they say, moved on.

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of emerging masculinities is that nothing about them is exactly new. Nothing is being created, no new idea, no new form emerges. What happens instead is a shuffling of a certain portion of preexisting elements. The once repudiated is now embraced. What was once outside is taken in; what was taken in is now expelled. Emerging masculinities seem to repudiate previous repudiations and to renounce the premises on which they were based. Certain definitions of the masculine are no longer defended; they are instead subverted. Emerging masculinities taunt the limitations of their predecessors. (In this they mimic emerging theories: surpassing, with an often self-satisfied backward glance, the old-fashioned constraints of their predecessors. There may well be structural links and congruencies binding our notions of the masculine and our notions of the psychoanalytic. If so, our capacities to think about the one while holding the other steady are going to be necessarily, and seriously, taxed. This possibility can only be remarked upon here.)

1189

If we are to think about emerging masculinities, linked or not with our emerging theories, we need to reflect on the role of ideology as it infiltrates both of these potentially linked zones of expression.

ON IDEOLOGY

Much of psychoanalytic theory and practice over the past hundred years has been deformed by ideology transferring itself onto theory. There seems widespread agreement among psychoanalysts that a stabilizing, long unnoticed convergence of theory and ideology served to underwrite what, only much later, was revealed as a degraded conceptualization of gays and lesbians, of women and femininity.

By and large, the deformations in our theories of masculinity have appeared more indirectly. They are structured as the negative complement to our more direct, and more directly deforming, theories

of femininity. The theorization of masculinity, by inference, has emerged almost silently. It has lurked there, an unnoticed anchoring point, the ostensibly nondeformed referent against which all of these deformed categories meet their measure. Gays and lesbians, and women in general, were thought deficient precisely to the extent that they lacked whatever “masculinity” possessed. They squirmed, alibied, and postured, when what they ought to have done was either submit or compete.

No matter how untangled our theory gets, though, we can still sense, with near certainty, the ideological critique-to-come. In our best moments, then, we try to put only part of our weight on what Freud called theoretical scaffolding, and what we here, in this context of thinking about masculinity, can call theoretical ideology.

Here is the first of two sentences from Proust (1913) that demonstrate the difficulty of separating any notion of masculinity from its imbedded ideology: “‘That’s no way to make him strong and active,’ she [the grandmother] would say sadly, ‘especially that boy, who so needs to build up his endurance and willpower’” (p. 11).

1190

We know the grandmother is out to support the boy’s masculinity, but we also know she is saturated with local ideology. In effect, she is insisting that he get out of stretchy pants.

“Strong,” “active,” “endurance,” “willpower”—how do we chart our movement away from these masculine signifiers that give force and meaning to this ideologically loaded sentence?

While we would no longer write that sentence, we would, I think, still support the grandmother in her efforts to help the boy . . . do what? To somehow become masculine, by teaching him to repudiate—in this case to repudiate “passive” forms of pleasure.

Can we theorize the grandmother’s effort; can we write it, *with particulars*, in such a way that we can feel confident that those particulars are immune to a lurking ideological critique?

I don’t think we can, not with confidence. All the particulars that make up today’s required repudiations are potential targets. The act of repudiation itself endures, in principle indifferent to shifts in contemporary particulars.

Here’s another sentence, easier perhaps to position ourselves against, but nonetheless equally difficult to loose from its ideological moorings: “My father would shrug his shoulders and study the barometer, for he liked meteorology, while my mother, making no noise so as not to disturb

him, watched him with a tender respect, but not so intently as to try to penetrate the mystery of his superior qualities” (p. 11).

We can confidently locate, and expunge, much of the ideological freight residing in “the mystery of his superior qualities.” But how would we now write that moment? How would we theorize what the mother sees—some feature of the father that seems to provoke her love? She wants to maintain an attachment to this feature, whatever it is. She wants it left undisturbed. The feature seems to suggest masculinity, no matter how ideologically saturated.

How would we theorize a masculinity whose cardinal feature is that it be the object of idealization? One has the sense that both mother and father share in the idea that they are living amid “superior qualities”—the mother as a believer, the father as a carrier. Might not their shared silence represent an effort to preserve a belief in these qualities, a kind of piety? It seems that the very idea of masculinity might depend on a community of believers. This may be an enduring characteristic of masculinity—that it house the unattainable—that, in that sense, it stands as both parallel and complement to “beauty”? (This line of thought, by the way, is directly indebted to Lacan’s theorization of the “signification of the phallus.”)

No matter its particular ideologically mediated forms, then, masculinity, as an object of belief, might enduringly resist capture by reason. When cornered, say, masculinity, like beauty, would, as an integral feature of itself, repudiate reason, renounce it. Masculinity, like beauty, would stake a claim on special rights, “superior qualities.” It would locate a possibility, an aspiration, a point of ongoing, and enduring, resistance to regulation. There seems something rogue about masculinity, simultaneously destructive and hopeful, our enduringly present “bad boy.” Such ideologically mediated idealization—of masculinity and of beauty—would leave the carriers of both—especially to the extent that the carrying task was experienced as a necessity—burdened by lives of brittleness and fragility.

Clinically, our work on masculinity (and, for that matter, on beauty) aims to reframe, and thus to lighten, this burden. The burden is bundled into ideologically mediated packages. Perhaps the best we can hope for in this work is to reveal the shape and content of our predecessors’ packaging and to await descendants who will expose our own.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE MASQUERADE

In order to think a bit further about “masculinity,” let us consider for a moment the following quick, and confusing, view of another couple. A wife is speaking of her husband: “Even though he was a man, he was more like a woman. . . . He was so nice and tender. He was very feminine. I couldn’t tell the difference whether he was male or female. So I never begrudged having to feed him” (*New York Times*, July 17, 2006, p. A4).

Here, in Marado, South Korea, in a village of women who bring in the money by diving in the sea and men who tend the house and raise the children, we hear of another man being spotted sporting another version of stretchy pants. He “was so nice and tender,” says his wife of the husband who, in effect, seems to have repudiated the demand to repudiate the “feminine” qualities of niceness and tenderness.

How does this woman seem to gauge the husband’s repudiation, to assess its meanings? How would we? There is no clear telling, given the scant information we have. But I think we can sense immediately that the husband’s posture of apparent repudiation provokes questions, certainly in the wife and probably in us: What is he doing and why is he doing it? To what extent is his being “feminine” compulsory; to what extent masterful? What is the place—where do we look in order to find—what anyone might actually mean by “masculinity” in this ostensibly scrambled setup? What kind of framework might we need in order to think nonideologically about this question? Can we find one?

To pursue these questions a bit, let us imagine an even more scrambled setup. Let us imagine a masculinity powerful enough to have surpassed the necessity of any repudiation: not only nice and tender, but also housing all the pertinent dualisms: assertive and submissive, penetrating and receptive, active and passive, dominating and submissive, kind and gruff . . .

I think that even here, in this patently fantastic vision, this endlessly plastic, inclusive version of masculinity would not necessarily satisfy us—no matter whether we were its bearer or its witness. It would instead seem merely another “version” of masculinity, an extreme one to be sure, but one that, on its face, lacks the power to convince us. This, I think, is the point. Masculinity, on its face, lacks the capacity to legitimate itself. It always needs affirmation, and there, in that need, lies its delegitimizing “weak point,” its confession to be less than—

other than—it aspires to. No matter how complete, masculinity suspects itself of pretending.

Let us, for the moment, locate a critical, perhaps cardinal, facet of masculinity at the point where it encounters this suspicion.

Here, I think, is a pointed example:

A twenty-five-year-old woman in analysis is speaking of her husband: “He always says I look beautiful when I’m naked. But he never does anything to make me naked. He never goes after me, takes off my clothes. He respects me too much. He treats what’s mine as mine. It’s why I can live with him. But I want violence. Why isn’t he more like that? He can’t be. He shouldn’t be. But I want him to be. I want him to do what I don’t want him to do. It’s too confusing.” This woman, I think, is struggling to assess her relation to “masculinity” and her desire for it in her husband. Whatever he’s done, whatever accommodations he’s made, leave her simultaneously pleased—“It’s why I can live with him”—and dissatisfied—“Why isn’t he more like that?”

This woman is inhabited by a suspicious shadow—an internal object, say—against whom her husband’s “masculinity” (and, by the way, her analyst’s “real” effectiveness) must be measured. She is dogged by the pursuit of “real” masculinity, her desire to find it as well as her desire to flee from it. As in the moment spoken of above, each time she lands on a resolution she finds it both partial and temporary.

The “masculinity” she finds has always—and will always, I think—prove suspect: too violent, not violent enough; too gentle, not gentle enough; too respectful, not respectful enough—always only approximating what she calls “the real thing.”

And what about this imaginary man who can do it all—an idea that is figured here, in the patient’s fantasy, in the form of a man simultaneously violent and respectful—a man who can rise above elemental contradictions. I think she (and, like her, we) will always remain suspicious even of this imaginary figure. We will still insist that he legitimate his claim. We will insist that the term *masculinity* be pinned down. And we will invariably, I think, pin it down by having it lean on, and be measured against, its predecessors.

“Masculinity,” I think, always leans on an idealized memory of men, or perhaps of one man, a kind of original. In trying to think one’s way into what “masculinity” might mean, one drifts toward an image of an original figure. After that come all the rest, the followers. And because, in imagination, they are merely that—followers—they are

always susceptible to the accusation that their version of “masculinity” is a masquerade.

We insist that the claimant mean what he says, do what he means. But the problem, I think, is that finally what he really means is to be like an imagined predecessor, to masquerade as an original. And he is, I think, without exception, caught in the act.

CLINICAL POSTSCRIPT

Fuck you. I hate you.

Fuck you. I love you.

You can't be a man if you don't love men.

You can't be a man if you do love men.

This nearly poetic outburst, addressed to his analyst, came during the psychoanalytic treatment of a fifty-five-year-old, self-consciously contemporary man, a Jack Black kind of figure, a man located at what he senses to be masculinity's cutting edge, a man who recently landed the woman he yearned for, the job he never thought he'd get, and the openly expressed gratitude of long embittered sons.

1194

This man frames an enduring, destabilizing predicament that seems to me to perpetually dog both the definition of and the aspiration toward masculinity. Since you must simultaneously love men and hate them, while also neither loving them nor hating them, you will have just missed the masculinity you're after. No matter where you land, or whom you love; no matter what you renounce, or what you take in, you will always, always, be susceptible to the judgment that you did it wrong.

So finally, since you both missed it and are missing it, as this patient so woefully says, “You can't be a man,” not really.

REFERENCES

- FREUD, S. (1905). Three essays on the theory of sexuality. *Standard Edition* 7:130–243.
- PROUST, M. (1913). *Swann's Way*, transl. L. Davis. New York: Viking Penguin, 2003.
- RICOEUR, P. (1970). *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, transl. D. Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press.