

## *What Has Happened to Manliness?*

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**T**oday the very word “manliness” seems quaint and obsolete. We are in the process of making the English language gender neutral, and manliness, the quality of one gender, or rather, of one sex, seems to describe the essence of the enemy we are attacking, the evil we are eradicating. Recently I had a call from the Harvard alumni magazine asking me to comment on a former professor of mine now being honored. Responding too quickly, I said: “What impressed all of us about him was his manliness.” There was a silence at the other end of the line, and finally the female voice said: “Could you think of another word?”

My study of manliness has led me, however, to a preliminary observation about its dubious status at present. This is that manliness has always been dubious. It is true that until recently, most men have held a confident belief in male superiority, to put it mildly. Even now, few men would wish to exchange their sex for a woman’s (though it has been done). But thoughtful men of all kinds — poets, playwrights, philosophers, novelists, essayists — have almost all had something to say about manliness. They were not complacent. And what they have said, strangely enough, has been critical to one degree or another.

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Let us look at two well-known authors who show their doubt of manliness, in two well-known writings. They will also give us a first stab at defining manliness.

First, recall the incident in the first chapter of *Tom Sawyer* between Tom and the new boy in town. It is a dispute over nothing, arising merely for the sake of superiority: a meaningless argument, vain boasting on both sides, a line drawn in the dust, the dare to step over it accepted, a scuffle followed by recriminations and threats. It is not hard to guess that this is Mark Twain's picture of manliness done in childish caricature. He seems to say that manliness is childish, only perhaps not so funny and its irrationality not so obvious or so innocent when assumed by adult males. In the adult version, the scuffle is a war. Twain's critique — though this is just a glimpse of a wonderful book — resembles a woman's disdain for men's foolish daring.

Another view of manliness can be found in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, at the end, in Mark Antony's tribute to Brutus. The speech ends: "His life was gentle, and the elements so mix'd in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, 'This was a man.'" Of course, Brutus has just lost the battle and has died by his own hand; so any tribute from nature would be a kind of consolation in defeat. Indeed we perhaps especially reserve tributes to manliness for noble losers; nothing more substantial is left to them. But we human beings have to make the tributes. Nature, unfortunately, does not stand up and speak for itself, as Antony seems to wish; Antony, a man, has to speak up for a man and say how perfect he was.

Actually, it is Shakespeare, speaking through Antony, who speaks for nature. Poets must assert the dignity and excellence of man against nature because nature on its own preserves no memory of the best human beings. It is only through Shakespeare (and other poets, aided by historians) that we know of Brutus, only through Homer that we know of Achilles. Manly men like Antony have a tendency to believe that manliness speaks for itself, as if manliness were a natural perfection that all can recognize implicitly, that nature makes perfectly obvious. In Shakespeare's view — again, nothing but a glimpse of one speech — manliness looks better than it does in the scene from *Tom Sawyer*. Since it serves the function of defending us against tyrants like Julius Caesar, it is not merely foolish. But manly men tend to exaggerate the naturalness of their behavior, and they forget the need for poets, who are not men of action. Manliness is biased in

favor of action. That is a severe criticism, when you think about it. One could even say that thinking is by itself a challenge to the superiority of manliness.

So we are beginning to get a picture of manliness, neither altogether favorable nor dismissive. Manliness can have something heroic about it (Tom Sawyer, the boy who caricatures manliness, is nonetheless Twain's hero). It lives for action, yet is also boastful about what manly men will do and have done. It jeers at those who do not seem manly, and asks us continually to prove ourselves. It defines turf and fights for it, sometimes for no good reason, sometimes to defend precious rights. And it exaggerates its independence, as if action were an end in itself and manly men were the best or only kind of human being.

We can see the quality, manliness, even if we do not hear the word. We can see that manliness is still around, and that we still find it attractive. What do we like about manliness? Two things, I would say, for a start: The *confidence* of manly men and their ability to *command*. The confidence of a manly man gives him independence of others. He is not always asking for help or directions or instructions; he is in control. He knows his job, and he stands fast in that knowledge. If he doesn't really know his job, his confidence is false and he is just boasting. If he knows it but lets himself be pushed around, he's also not really confident; he merely has the basis for confidence. The first case of boasting is a manly excess, the second is a defect of manliness. For some reason manliness includes, or is hospitable to, too much manliness, but it emphatically rejects a person who has too little of it. So a manly man is often portrayed in novels, in the movies, or wherever, in exaggeration — even though too much manliness is also a defect and can have disastrous consequences.

The independence of a manly man would keep him from getting involved with other people. He would be aloof, satisfied with himself and none too interested in other people's problems. At the least he would wait to intervene until he is called upon to do so. But that degree of independence is in tension with the other manly element, the ability to command. The manly man is good at getting things done, and one reason is that he is good at *ordering* people to get them done. In politics and in other public situations, he willingly takes responsibility when others hang back. He not only stands fast but also steps up to do what is required. In private life, in the family, this

ability makes him protective of his wife and children because they seem to him weaker (he probably exaggerates the weakness of women). Being protective (as opposed to nurturing) is a manly form of responsibility in private life analogous to getting into politics in public life. In both there is an easy assumption of authority. Manly men take authority for granted — the need for authority in general, and their own authority. All of us recognize the need for authority, whether emergency or everyday, and we are attracted to those who seem to radiate authority and thus inspire confidence.

Most people are either too enthusiastic about manliness or too dismissive of it. They think that manliness is the only virtue, and all virtue; or they think it is the last, stupid stereotype, soon to be as dead as a dodo. To study it well, the trick is not to get carried away to either extreme. Yet manliness is a passionate quality, and it often leads to getting carried away, whether for good or ill. A sober, scholarly treatment risks failing to convey the nobility of manliness — it's so easy to deflate and make fun of. That's particularly true today when the picture of manliness conveyed to us is as direct and unsubtle as Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*, Ted Nugent in *Cat Scratch Fever*, and Jesse Ventura in *Governor of Minnesota*.

What we need is the study of manliness that is lacking today from those who suspect it as well as from those who might defend it. A study asks questions, and my questions about manliness are political, social and intellectual.

1) The political meaning of manliness comes first. Manliness is an individual quality that causes a human being to come forth, stand up for something, and make an issue of it. It is a quality held by private persons that calls them forth into public, hence into politics. In the past such persons have been predominantly though not exclusively males, and it is of course no accident that those who possess a quality that propels them into politics end up as the rulers: once in politics they do not modestly depart after the occasion of their entry has passed. What starts out as protest against some injustice easily crosses over into aggression on behalf of a cause, and then into defense of the aggressors. Manliness seems to be a mixture of defensiveness and aggression.

The manly types defend their *turf*, as we have been taught to say by the sociobiologists. They rightly connect manliness to the behavior of other mammals, who first create their own turf, marking out

its boundaries with any convenient means, and then defend it. Tom Sawyer very decently drew a line in the dust with his bare toe. The analogy to animals obviously suggests something animal in manliness, which in turn suggests other things. What is animal in human beings may be functional, but it is not rational or not fully rational; and if it is part of our biological nature, it is also deeply ingrained. But of course manliness is specifically human as well. Manly men defend not their turf but their country, which stands for something. Manliness is best shown in war, the defense of one's country at its most difficult and dangerous. In Greek, the word for manliness, *andreia*, is also the word for courage. Aristotle says that courage is best shown in battle. The issue raised over women in the military today concerns the sovereign claim of manliness as the title to rule. For if women can fight as well as men, why can they not govern as well, and as deservedly?

Here is a line of thinking that makes war or conflict central to politics, and manliness the inspiration of both. It has behind it the evidence not only of males ruling over all societies at almost all times but also of male preponderance in crime and in the prison population. For good and for ill, males, apparently impelled by their manliness, have dominated all politics we know of. Is there something inevitable about this domination or is it merely experience up to now, from which we are free to depart? What is the future of patriarchy?

One reason to doubt its future is that manliness seems undemocratic, while the direction of history in America and elsewhere seems to be toward ever more democracy. To put oneself forward, even in behalf of someone else or a higher cause, seems to require a display of ego. The manly man will take it personally if you do not pay attention to what he says. But a display of ego implies that one is not satisfied with what satisfies most people; it is at base an aristocratic impulse. Women, having less "ego" (in the popular sense of willingness to display it) are more democratic than men, as Aristophanes shows in his play *The Congresswomen*. As more regimes become democratic, and existing democracies become more democratic, all should benefit from the fact that democracies do not fight one another. Perhaps, then, manliness will be less in demand at the end of history, when all states are democratic and peaceful. This is what William James feared in his famous essay on "The Moral Equivalent of War." The moral equivalent is manliness, and

James thought it so valuable that it ought to be generated artificially now that survival no longer makes it necessary.

Yet in contrast to such fears, based on a supposed incompatibility of manliness and democracy, there is a democratic manliness, as explained by Tocqueville. In democracies, he said, a manly frankness prevails, an open and fearless stance of “man to man” in which all — or all males — are equal. A man does not have to hide his feelings as he does in an aristocracy, where he is always living in the presence of superiors and inferiors. When Americans travel today, they often judge the men they meet as unmanly in comparison with American men. Their manners seem precious to us, perhaps because they maintain a certain reserve toward others that is a vestige of the aristocratic past of their societies. Such men can be sexy — think of Marcello Mastroianni — but sexy is not the same thing as manly. It is a question, however, whether the sensitive male is either sexy or manly — though he is intended to be very democratic. Will modern women be attracted to the kind of man who is sensitive to them and perhaps a little too eager to please?

In sum, manliness as we have known it has been at the core of politics. What will happen when the gender gap is closed and politics is feminized or made available to women on an equal basis? Either manliness must be transformed into a sexless quality or its relevance must be reduced, if it cannot be eliminated altogether. And a second question: how are manliness and democracy related? Should democracy regard manliness as an enemy because it is the privilege of one sex, or does democracy require, and tend to produce, a certain manliness?

2a) The social meaning of manliness covers another set of questions. Sexually, a man must “perform” in a way that a woman need not. The performance is of course more a matter of desire than choice, but still there is something theatrical about male sex that easily reminds us of showing off. Whereas brute animals show off for the purpose of display, which has a biological function, human ones show off in the more metaphorical sense of making a drama of yourself. I have already mentioned the use that poets make of manly men, and the criticism with which philosophers respond. This duel between poetry and philosophy is featured in Plato’s *Republic*, which could be described as a debate on the value of manliness. To make a drama of yourself is to make a federal case of your private troubles, to invest them with universal or cosmic significance as did Achilles when

Agamemnon stole his girlfriend. Manly men bring cases of injustice to the attention of society or of the gods, but they do tend to exaggerate.

Or, on the contrary, is it not the case that truly manly men do not complain but suffer without complaint? But they are not humble. They are at their best when championing the deserving cause of someone weaker than they are, but they do not allow themselves to be insulted. They have a strong sense of honor. Though they do not complain, they make it clear that they are not complaining. You could even say that they boast of not complaining, or that they boast of not boasting. Manly men make assertions, and then they make good on them, or fail nobly. Now we are back to “performance.”

2b) Another social aspect of manliness is its attitude toward women. Here the most frequent feminist criticism of manliness enters: is male chauvinism necessary to manliness? It certainly seems that manly men have had the habit of distinguishing themselves from the unmanly, whom they frequently call effeminate. They do not simply let others make the distinction but seem to feel the need to insist on it themselves. Theodore Roosevelt never praised manly deeds without also scorning weaklings and mollicoddles who shirk them. Now, is this habit necessary to manliness or can it be dispensed with as obsolete and unworthy? Is it possible to remove the exclusivity of manliness that the feminists indict and still get the same oomph? The energy of manliness seems to go with its eagerness to pass judgment — adverse judgments — on others. So if manliness is made sexless, so too must chauvinism.

Yet manliness, besides condemning effeminacy, offers gallantry to women. What is the true nature of gallantry? Is it really an admission of the superiority of women as it appears to be, or is it fundamentally insincere because it always contains an element of disdain? The man who opens a door for a woman makes a show of being stronger than she, you could say (Kant did say it); but on the other hand, the woman does go first. And manly men are often those most easily deceived by women — such was the reputation of the Spartans, who were the most manly Greeks. Manly men are romantic about women; unmanly men are sensitive. Which is better? Which is better for women?

2c) That brings us to sexual roles, the feature of all previous societies that feminists find most objectionable. Even more than “patriarchy” — the rule of men — the belief that nature has defined

different social roles for men and women is now found insulting to women. The belief has now largely been abandoned in favor of the feminist notion of “choice.” “Choice” in a new expanded sense applies not only to the decision to have an abortion but also to the range of choices that men used to have. A woman today has the choice of every occupation that used to be reserved for men, plus women’s roles. The latter are now transformed because women *choose* them rather than being condemned to them. But does this mean that they are performed better because they are now done willingly, or that they are done less well because women feel free to neglect them? Looking at men’s roles, one wonders what happens when men no longer have the duties that used to go with being a man. “Choice” for women is inevitably choice for men, too — and perhaps more for them than for women. If women find it easier to love their children than men do, then women’s duties toward children are less “dutiful,” more supported by inclination, than men’s duties. In the traditional view, the performance of men’s duties is aided by another feature of manliness, the desire to protect and support one’s family. To be a man means to be able to support one’s dependents, not merely oneself alone. But the modern woman above all does not want to be a dependent. She has perhaps not reflected on what her independence does to the manliness of men (it might seem to make men more selfish), and whether the protection she gladly does without will be replaced by sensitivity or by neglect. The statistics on male abandonment of their children in our day are not heart-warming.

The noun “parent” has always existed, but only recently has the verb “to parent” been created (by sociologists). Previously, the work that verb includes was done separately in two verbs — to father and to mother. Can the separation between father and mother be overcome so that “parenting,” which is neither, becomes a reality? Father and mother are the fundamental roles that undergird the sexual difference in occupations. If you can get rid of that difference in role, then all other differences will disappear too. One could say that the authoritative father and the loving mother correspond to the public and private spheres as wholes, the one where aggression is paramount, the other where caring is the theme. Abolition of sexual roles might then be expected to produce a mixing of public (understood broadly as the wider world) and private (the realm of familiars). Is this possible and desirable?

We now presuppose, more or less, that men and women are exchangeable. Are we forgetting about how they are complementary? In the gender-neutral society, any traditional notion that the sexes complement each other serves merely to justify the inferiority of women. Now, complementarity, if it really takes place, is a kind of equality in which each sex is superior in its place. But when you are sure that the overall superiority has been men's, and that women have been the "second sex," then to have equality, you must go for the exchangeability of the sexes. Yet there seems to be some truth in the complementarity, say, of aggression and caring, in hard and soft temperaments. The one is to accomplish, the other to preserve — and in between is neither. Of course, there are hard women and soft men. But the idea of "choice" must depend on there being no natural preponderance of one quality or the other in men and women. The logic of choice leads to the ideal of perfect flexibility in which nothing external determines, or even influences, our choice. That ideal of freedom is very like the final stage of communism that Karl Marx sketched so briefly, in which the division of labor has been done away with.

Underneath the question of roles is the question of nature: do men and women have different natures that justify different social roles — even different fates, as Tocqueville said — or are these so-called natures actually "socially constructed"? Social construction is a crucial element in the feminist argument because that idea enables women to escape the prison of nature. Once women see that their roles have been made for them, not permanently by nature but artificially, by society, they realize that what was made by humans can be unmade and remade by humans. The difficulty is that one woman cannot do this by herself; she needs the help of society, perhaps in the form of the women's movement. Will she then become the prisoner of society if not nature? Women now must follow new stereotypes succeeding the traditional ones; they must no longer be mousy housewives or attractive sirens. Surely the range of choice open to women now is greatly enlarged, but this success makes the remaining restrictions on choice harder to tolerate.

And what about manliness? Manliness does not easily accommodate choice because manly men are rather imperious and do not mind ordering other people around. Their frankness makes them sound a little bit peremptory, especially when they are "telling off"

some bully or presumptuous upstart. When manliness is extended to women, manly women will be bossy to other women. Bossy people of whichever sex are a hindrance to choice, yet manly people tend to be bossy. Being manly, therefore, is less likely in a society characterized by choice, which as such prefers the sort of tolerant, easy-going person who doesn't close down other people's choices. Again we see that the gender-neutral society constricts manliness without really meaning to do so.

2d) Still another question for the social meaning of manliness is whether there is a natural "sexual constitution" to be found in all societies. That is the notion of George Gilder, a very lonely critic of feminism who has no academic appointment, in his book *Men and Marriage*. In his argument Gilder makes explicit what is presumed in works of evolutionary biology and sociology. These authors deny that all relations between the sexes are socially constructed, and claim that there is an instinctual or innate relationship built into human beings that precedes and determines any thinking they may do on their own. Starting from the complementarity of sexual intercourse, where nature uses us for her purpose, they find all important sexual relations to be an implicit bargain reflecting ingeniously programmed strategies for survival.

Aristotle said that men come together for the sake of life, and stay together for the sake of the good life; but this complication does not enter into the biological viewpoint, which looks at everything as means to survival. But survival as what? To answer that question, some understanding of the good life must enter in, set forth with the assertiveness supplied by manly men. Manliness represents the desire in us to refuse to be nature's slaves and to insist on socially constructing even our "sexual constitution." Socrates said that sexual intercourse should be accompanied by beautiful speeches of love, so as to humanize what is otherwise brute pleasure. The biologists help to restrain the excesses of social constructionists, especially those who think that they can do away with sexual differences by renaming sex "gender." For where does the power to *name* come from if not from nature? Nature enables and requires us to construct our own lives. Thus the dichotomy between nature and social construction cannot be correct: our nature leaves us free, but our freedom is limited by our nature. Manliness is the epitome of this conundrum because it seems to come from our nature, yet stands up for us

against nature. That is why manly men behave so oddly. They are not artificial; they do what comes naturally. But what is natural to them seems excessive and unnecessary to the rest of us.

2e) We have been led to the question of whether manliness is nature or nurture. Is it permanent or ephemeral? Clearly manliness is related to what Plato called “spiritedness” (*thymos*), the defense and the defensiveness of one’s self that human beings share with animals. Spiritedness is less rational and reflective than manliness (which is not what one would call *thoughtful*). It appears in women as well as men, though perhaps in different ways. Women get angry too, but somehow with less drama and more subtlety than men. Or are sexist statements like that one, based on warmed-over common sense, now obsolete?

Perhaps manliness is capable of being abstracted from males and refashioned into something sexually neutral such as strength of soul. Descartes made a key concept of strength of soul, and there is no doubt that it applies more generally than manliness. One would readily agree that many women have admirable strength of soul. But again, do they have it in the same way as men? It seems that women have more steadiness and endurance, men more alacrity and ambition. In the movie *Fargo*, a pregnant woman police officer triumphs over men who are either unmanly or whose manliness takes the form of vicious cruelty merely with her plodding but intelligent, asexual professionalism. The movie seems to say that rule-bound professionalism (for example, the “professional army”) is replacing erratic manliness in occupations that were once the most manly, and that by this means women, who are steadier than men, can replace them, or at least do as well. Women don’t fly off the handle so easily.

3) The intellectual meaning of manliness answers the question of whether there is a sexual constitution in *thinking*. Is there a man’s and a woman’s point of view? The point of view may not arise from the situation of men and women, but the reverse: the situation from the point of view. Perhaps men and women are characterized more by how they think than by their sexual organs, the higher being the cause of the lower. For if you think only of the sexual organs, you confine the meaning of man and woman to the sexual union, a brief encounter whose consequence is sometimes the birth of a man or woman. What about the lives of men and women apart from reproduction? When we are not doing nature’s work, and perhaps even

then, our minds are busy with — one would not say thinking, except in the broadest sense. Being a man or a woman is much more than having certain bodily equipment; one has a certain outlook, too.

Yet, just because sexuality is also a matter of thinking, it is possible for a woman to see a man's point of view, and barely possible for a man to see a woman's (the sexes seem to be asymmetrical in this). It is possible to recognize one's bias and thus to transcend one's sex. No doubt one doesn't leave one's sex behind when transcending it. The pure thinking of mathematics has no sex, but men and women have different aptitudes for mathematics, even for different parts of it. Here lurks the old mystery of how body and mind are connected.

In what way, however, do we transcend our sex? There seem to be two ways: by generalizing or by rising above. Today the feminists in their academic way speak of "self" and "other," and their very abstract discourse spills over into real life, too. By mutual recognition and reconciliation, the two sexes come to understand and appreciate each other. The process consists in leveling; the two sexes (or one of them — the male) may begin with pretensions, but they learn to abandon them. You learn to want or love someone on your own level. But what of eros that aims at something higher than oneself — love of beauty, wisdom, perfection? Here is transcendence in a truer sense that does not generalize or level down pretensions but on the contrary seeks something rare and wants to justify one's pretensions.

The asymmetry of the sexes that I spoke of applies to abstracting from one's sex. Women often understand men, but men rarely understand women. Men tend to be manly, a quality that makes them oblivious of the sexual difference. It is part of manliness not to see that manly is male, and therefore lacks something; the manly man thinks manliness is enough and does not understand what is missing. When one is oblivious of sexual differences, it is easy to leave them behind. Women, understanding men better, are more sensitive to sexual differences, hence more aware of themselves, hence less able to forget themselves. A he/she joke goes: He: Why do women always take things personally? She: Doesn't apply to me. Men through their manliness are more transcendent; women, without that advantage and that encumbrance, are better aware of what is left behind.

Is manliness a virtue? It is too close to our biology, which means

to a quality of lower animals, to be called a virtue. It is subhuman and subrational; it lacks the element of voluntary choice necessary to virtue. But in humans, the quality of manliness can ally with the reason specific to humans so as to rise above its generic nature, in the process becoming specifically human and, at the same time, a possible virtue. The alliance with reason enables manliness to pass from aggressive defense of one's own to noble sacrifice for a cause beyond oneself.

But of course women have reason too, and they are not devoid of aggressiveness. Therefore, the price of humanizing manliness, of raising it from quality to virtue, is allowing women to participate in it. It will not be equal participation because, as Aristotle said, men find it easier to be courageous — and likewise, women find it easier to be moderate. In thinking of the sexual difference, and of human nature generally, you cannot avoid Aristotle's hedging phrase, "for the most part." For the most part, men will always have more manliness than women have, and it is up to both sexes, having faced that fact, to fashion this quality into virtue.