



THE THREE ENEMIGOS: DESTRUCTIVE MYTHS ABOUT MALES

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ABSTRACT

The myth of gender non-difference, the myth of men's power, and the myth of the affectively impoverished male pervade much of the West. These myths excuse how males are treated. That there are no differences between male and female is a fantasy that males have resisted. Men's power over their own lives is as limited as women's but more for social reasons. The story of powerful men is not the story of most men. The myth of the presumably affectively impoverished male is related to the myth of male power. Here the issue is what society encourages and allows males to express. Absent inhibiting and encouraging forces, males are as capable of identifying and speaking what they feel.

Key words: boys, males, men, misandry, myths

INTRODUCTION

Three myths about boys and men are implicit in most discussions in the American media and learned publications about sex, status, privilege and power: the myth of gender non-difference, the myth of men's power, and the myth of the affectively impoverished male. Their influence has been disseminated throughout much of North America, the UK, Europe and Australia. The fact they are yoked is not surprising in the Gender Era. However, as we enter the Post-gender Era, an era in which, having exhausted itself in a miasma of angry incoherence, the concept of gender is losing its legitimacy in a fog of claims about what is natural and what is socially constructed, we might recall the origins of the concept as its vapor trail dissipates.

Gender was an invention of anglophone sociologists and psychiatrists who lived in the post-World War II period of relaxation following decades of war in Europe and Asia. An even minimally nuanced history of Western boys and men of that period has not been written, but it will show the connection between men in general being treated badly and fascination with a phenomenon said to be related to sex.

As mostly young men were being blown apart in an extravagance of ordnance and fire during the 1939-1945 war in Europe and the Pacific, a change in attitude toward the returning remnants was forming among those who had stayed behind, especially the wives and girlfriends of those men. Their mothers knew better but were relegated to attempting as best they could to rehabilitate their sons' families.

The history of ingratitude shown veterans of both wars that filled the first half of the 20th century is so shocking that the chapter in it on the appearance in the mid-1950s of the odd notion of gender, documented in the writings of Alec Comfort, Harry Stack Sullivan, and the battalion of feminist theorists who began publishing in the early 1960s mostly in the United States, has been omitted or speed-read. The concept and changes in our general attitude toward boys and men are associated with a trio of myths.

THE PRE-GENDA ERA

In the Pre-gender Era, open affection between males was free and easy, as it has been in most cultures. In the States, male *adhesiveness*—the propensity for intimacy and close friendship—was distinguished from *amativeness*, which described a man's feelings in his

relationship with a woman in the setting of the family, that ubiquitous institution of child making and child supporting that every culture has also known. The high point of the Republic's culture so far, American transcendentalism, extolled male adhesiveness along with self-reliance in a context of a spirituality deeper than church observances. Its spokesmen were Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman.

The attunement between males that friendship implied was known to men during and after the homeland's Civil War. Men from Mediterranean cultures who emigrated to the United States on the eve of a new century were comfortable with open camaraderie and along with the somewhat more reserved British and northern European immigrants were at home in the homosocial worlds of farmers, miners, sailors and lumberjacks. It was essential among the Great War's fighting brigades. The muted intimacy of male adhesiveness was implicit among assembly line workers, cowboys, and the upper echelon of business and finance. Laying railroad track, working in factories and on Wall Street, men understood one other. While big-city life was often a challenge to men and boys, who thrive in open spaces, fellow feeling was also understood there.

Having been sent overseas only at the end of the First World War, in the 1940's males were shipped in droves to Europe and the Pacific. There mostly young men easily lived in a closeness that is comparable only to prison life. While they were away, they were missed and portrayed as heroes, but the reality of their experience was minimized. When they returned (first, shell-shocked, then post-traumatic and the subjects of study by that now busier than ever medical specialty, mid-20th-century psychiatry), they were treated as tainted shadows of who they had been. Males were separated from one another after months or even years of close contact that had blurred the physical and the emotional; without their buddies they were no longer as welcome as, in hindsight, everyone should have expected. Many spoke for several years of having had pals in the service. Some of them met again, but post-war separation amounted to the death of the other. VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) homes were saturated with alcohol and failed miserably in providing some sort of substitute for what these men had known and lost that had gotten them through the traumatic life of the battlefield. They expected to find satisfaction at home with their wives and among new colleagues on the job, but they did not find it in those places to the degree required. The loneliness they felt was forced underground by the boredom

of shift labor and the new world of tedious office work. Their wives welcomed them home, but the culture in general did not. In Europe, where men had fought in the streets of their hometowns and nearby fields, their heroism and sacrifices were not overlooked and they were never sidelined socially.

With the advent of television in the United States, a view of men as silly and weak was disseminated. Father may have known best, but as a man he was more often portrayed as a foolish bungler who worked in the aircraft industry or as a bus driver. On the other hand, fatherhood had been on the wane before the First World War, and its disappearance after the Second World War was only accelerated by the absence of men returning to a lukewarm homecoming in 1945. Americans increasingly heard that now there was no more need for the father. It was said that mothers had done the father job just as well as they had as replacements for missing men on the assembly line.

THE NOW

Now, more than seventy years later and after the interpolation of two more wars in Southeast Asia and a slew of them in the Middle East and environs, attempts to restore the closeness between men are still missing. Like the blown-up cities they were ordered to maul in the Sixties and later, more and more men are in ruins. More important, talk of toxic masculinity as the social ailment of postmodernity is strident.

We are now nearly a century into habits of ignoring men, but forms of misandry have also materialized that are subtle and more often than not disguised under cover of the rhetoric of the Patriarchy and presumed male privilege. Emotional isolation, increasing suicide rates among young and early middle-age men, and the phenomena of *men gone missing* and *men going their own way* reflect the unwritten history outlined. These are the symptoms of a lingering deep anguish and anger which occasionally breaks through, brutally and mindlessly, in the infamously explosive lives of late-teen or twenty-something loner shooters, that macabre brotherhood without a frat house that is unique to the United States. Their terrorism is mostly against themselves but it also destroys peers and random symbols of absent parents and indifferent adults.

Several myths have grown up around this unwritten history and its fallout to excuse the

tragic situation. They support one another, while the boys and men they are about do not. Together these myths portray half of humanity as without ontological difference from the other half. Boys and men are said to be wired to be violent, overbearing, and incapable of even animal warmth, let alone authentic emotional intimacy. Each misrepresenting myth is marketed as justification for even more bad behavior toward boys and men. Where to begin?

MYTH 1 — GENDER NON-DIFFERENCE

The first myth is gender non-difference, that there is no difference between males and females, boys and girls, men and women. Behind this myth is the conceptual conflation of sex, gender, and sexual preference. Sexual preference means favoring one course of behavior over another, but when does a male drawn to sexual intercourse with a female *prefer* this to making out with a man or simulating intercourse with him in anal penetration? There is no preference here, however, since that would imply two comparable tendencies, but sexual intercourse and any another kind of presexual physical interaction (masturbation, oral sex, anal sex) or social intercourse with physical contact (petting, kissing) are not sexual options, as the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* were invented to suggest. There is sexuality (intercourse between a male and a female) and there is playfulness, which may include genital contact. As the Post-gender Era spokespersons themselves are saying (but for different reasons), sexual preference is a meaningless notion. As they explain, since gender is fluid, sexual preference cannot and need not be identified at all. What these theorists overlook, however, is that they are dispensing not only with the idea of sexual preference but also with the ideas of gender.

Sex difference is quite unlike both gender difference and sexual preference. Denying sex is like denying difference in eye color. Both are permanent, genetically determined features of a body. They can be disguised by certain kinds of clothing or tinted contact lenses, but these are entirely cosmetic modifications that either wash away or are thrown into the wash.

The human embryo is initially undifferentiated and transforms into a male or female fetus, a common structural *Anlage* morphing into male or female genitalia. Remnants of the nondifferentiated structure include nipples and an erectile organ. The penis is a large clitoris. (Freud had it backwards.) The male's gonads emerge out of his abdomen and the female's remain inside hers. Puberty brings further modifications into a body which, if it is male, contains more striated muscle cells than a female body. When structured around a skeleton with

narrower hips and broader shoulders, supported on bigger feet and managed by larger hands, the result is a body that is stronger, whose center of gravity is higher than a female body's, and one that must move in a variation of a certain stride.

While the anatomical details are fascinating and the mystery of *sexual* attraction seems to have to do with the visual preference for certain body shapes, what concerns us here is not so much the outer form of a body, but rather that quality attributed to it that has somehow been separated from the sexed body, namely, its gender—the inner feeling of being a man or a woman. There is no such inner feeling of being male or being female. There are only sensations and observed physical events. The masculinity and femininity associated with the two sexes are consequences of the physical features described that many languages preserve.

Man and woman, by contrast, are sociological terms that have more to do with habits learned by practice based on imitation. There is an inner knowledge of how one is expected to act, but this is not an inner feeling.

Until recently, the connection between the biological creature and the social entity has been simply a matter of identifying what sort of creature could grow another human being inside her body and what sort of creature was needed to procreate the new being. Today an enlightened young man is taught to speak of his sexual mate and himself in this way: “We are pregnant.” In fact, only the female is pregnant. One grows and produces a male or female baby. The other claims and accepts a son or daughter. Both are parents, one by default (she has given birth), the other by choice (he has accepted responsibility for the pregnancy). Only someone bewitched by the notion of gender can confuse anatomical structures and bodily sensations with social roles, fashion and cosmetics.

The slippage in thinking between sex and gender has been possible only since pregnancy can be controlled by chemical contraception. Spontaneous abortion of a fetus is a common natural occurrence in the female body when in its wisdom structural anomalies are sensed, whether they be genetic or the result of disturbances of the internal environment (trauma, malnourishment of the mother, poisoning). It should not surprise that chemical contraception and talk of gender appeared on the scene around the same time—and at the time of increasing disparagement of males, divorce rates, and the use of psychotropic medications to dull or mute

emotional responses.

A female will never know what it is like to live in a male body. This is an experience that has certain behavioral manifestations that are interpreted differently by every male and account for varying behavioral expressions of being male. Orgasm with ejaculation is as unique to males as is the extrusion of a tiny human body through the extraordinarily narrow orifice through which parturition occurs. Just as unimaginable to a male is the experience of the periodic shedding of the lining of the uterus that females experience beginning with menarche. There are dozens of other details of physical experience that belong to being male and they are the province of the male sex. Their possibility as experiences is what matters. The effects of inhibition (physical and psychological) and other variables of social expectation influence the occurrence of such experiences, but the ubiquity of their possibility argues for the uniqueness of the experience of being male. Anatomy is not cosmetic. Men cannot fake an ejaculation.

That there are no differences between male and female is a fantasy that males have resisted. For most, gender role playing is associated with entertainment. And yet the myth of gender non-difference has become a powerful political tool designed to separate and divide human beings especially where cooperation is essential—in the family. We will see what happens to the currently popular interest in so-called transgenderism, which is superseding the drama of sexual preference.

MYTH 2 — MALE POWER

A second myth that affects the lives of males is the myth of men's power, that men are in power in society. Emanating from gender studies (the heir to women's studies) more than twenty-five years ago, we began to see studies of the lives of men and boys that questioned feminist claims about men's power over women. Such power was contrasted with the real power that matters to anyone, men and women, which is the power over one's own life, including the right to suicide, but also choices about the uses to which one's body may be put in society. Females rightly argued that their bodies should not be overpowered sexually and forced into pregnancy. There has not been a comparable argument about males' bodies.

Here again, the usefulness of distinguishing between male power (anatomical, physiological) and men's power (social) becomes apparent. As we have seen, male bodies are on

the whole more powerful than female bodies and this is a matter of the quantity of striated muscle and skeletal structure. The presence of certain androgens in great quantity especially from puberty on through the end of middle age makes possible greater speed and endurance over short spans of time. Males can lift objects much heavier than their own weight and propel objects at remarkable velocity. Their larger hands are capable of a tighter and stronger grip. Higher blood oxygen levels contribute to greater physical power and stamina over the short course. Small muscle strength and coordination in males is equal in females, for example, among pianists. A Martha Argerich or Yuja Wang is up to the virtuosity of a Svatislav Richter or Daniil Trifonov.

The myth of men's power is not about physical power, however. It is about the control of one's life. It is said that men have exploited their physical power to dominate women and girls. This is true for some men and has been observed in most cultures. Correcting this is obviously in service of a good.

What we have not heard about, however, is that males have done much the same with boys and other older males. The motivations for doing so attributed to males range from a drive for dominance, comparing them to apes and other living creatures that form and maintain hierarchies, to a sadistic tendency to manhandle and destroy everything from weaker human beings to regional and global biota. The quest for territoriality and access to females for sex pleasure to somehow find an ovum for every sperm they produce each minute is said to be what men want, quite apart from whatever society may be urging them to do. Consideration of this claim about questing must lead once again to realizing that whatever compulsions men are said to have are reducible to their being males. These have evolved over tens of thousands of years and will not easily be altered.

What interests us, however, is not the myth of male power, but the myth of men's power. The question about what sort of power matters can then be raised. The record shows that men's power over their own lives is as limited as women's, but more for social reasons than the demands of hormone-driven cycles and pregnancy which redound to being female. Motherhood, of course, is a different matter.

Among human beings there is as little an instinct for mothering as there is one for

controlling the lives of other males and females. That men are less connected to their offspring than women even when they mate for the long term is undeniable. So is the parallel between the history of the formation of culture and the history of masculinity. All of this, which is so much under lively discussion, is best explained, however, by what men have been called upon to do, in part because of being male but, by tradition, more of as a consequence of what men have had more than women, namely, time to do things unrelated to the human race, especially the offspring they have procreated.

Here it is important to recall that until the very recent advent of genetic testing, just who an infant's father is was anybody's guess. Males had multiple sex partners just as females did. Monogamy has become a cherished ideal but it was in the past an unimportant detail of one's biography. Over 400,000 years, male human beings also became men and, as such, given the great deal of time they had went about exploring, searching and researching. Only for a few generations have females not been held to the time-consuming tasks of pregnancy and the solitary responsibility for infant and child care. These changes—equal parenting, same-sex marriages, surrogacy—are newsworthy but will not undo habits that are still very much in practice in most non-Western societies and seem to haunt even the most ardent manly and womanly feminists and theorists of liberation and apologists for victimhood. What has evolved in males and females will not be overridden in a handful of generations in a medicalized technological society. The point is that men have come to have less power over their own lives than they once had as roaming hunters. Only a handful have had tremendous influence in society, but it was only thanks to the many other males they employed—some might say enslaved and used—to implement their plans. And these have been far more numerous than men horribly enslaved by abduction and reduced to a commodity.

The story of such powerful men is not the story of *most men*, however, and it is about most men that we are concerned. A few examples. Men do the dirty work, the lifting and hauling, the fighting for a few other men and women for something called patriotism and honor. They do such labor because they can. Here is the matter of *male* physical power which ironically caused most *men* to sacrifice real existential power in their lives.

An educated, free man might refuse to do backbreaking jobs, even it means he has little money at the end of the week and at the end of his life. Placing a high value on amassing more

possessions than he needs has supported submitting to these kinds of self-enslavement. To overcome this loss of real power, men do not need to be more sensitive, only more independent in spirit. A man may now refuse to work long hours engaged in tedious labor for his boss in the hopes of contributing more to the lives of his children, especially since his spouse is also bringing home an income. That many women now want to replace the labor of child making, giving birth and homemaking with a career is understandable since this provides her an opportunity to contribute her share of support of a family. Financial independence is another motive, but we are also hearing that many women are also finding that working for *the Man*, whether that *Man* is male or female, can be difficult.

To have power is to opt for following your bliss and this is unrelated to being male or female. That men seem to suffer more from the absence of this power now has everything to do with the changing infrastructure of sexual and social evolution. But, to repeat: We are naïve, it seems to me, to believe that this interior landscape will be changed by a few generations of creative cosmesis and fresh laws. Nearly all human laws constrain and are created by necessity to correct evils, not to create fresh possibilities. In fact, created following political fashion, many laws operate at a level far from the good. The reality as against the myth is that most of us, men and women, have little power—little power over others and even less in our own lives. The myth of men’s power overlooks the situation of *most men’s* lives.

MYTH 3 — FEELINGS

The third myth about males is that they are incapable of feeling, the myth of the emotional wasteland of boys’ and men’s lives. This is perhaps the most destructive of the three myths about males of all ages because it seems to support one of the other two. If males are less capable of feelings *other than anger*, they are less likely to be capable of empathy, love, and virtues such as altruism. It is said that because males are unfeeling, they easily reign in terror over others. It does not square, however, with the other myth, since if males and females are no different from each other and females are by nature affectionate, warm, and nurturant, males should be, too. They are not, so the argument goes, because these tendencies are implicit in the hypothetical mothering instinct and since males cannot bear children they are not hard wired to be warm and caring.

Here, again, the biological and social are not carefully distinguished. Mothering is not,

like lactation, a physiological process. It is also a quite different function in human beings than in other mammals, while as the word *mammal* makes clear, having breasts is required for nourishing newborns. Yet feeding and mothering are quite different. Grooming is instinctual in cats and dogs, for example, but human beings need to be shown how to clean their infants. They use water, not their tongues. The prevalence of human infanticide also requires questioning. Other mammals may do direct or indirect harm to some of their multiple births (for example, ignoring a runt), but human mothers, who *ordinarily* deliver only one newborn at a time, are known to kill it soon after birth or reject it as infancy proceeds. (The latter is likely one possible explanation of infantile autism.) The other details of mothering are learned from other mothers (including the female's own mother) in a community setting (a group of nursing mothers, an extended family), so that to a great extent mothering is a skill that anyone can carry out who can find a source of food for the newborn. If the mother is unable to produce milk, a wet nurse may be employed. Milk from other mammals (cows, goats) may be substituted until the infant can manage soft food. The point is that, apart from breast-feeding, mothering can be handled easily by the father. Current social trends encourage this.

In 1974, a phenomenon known as *engrossment* was identified by the pediatrician Martin Greenberg. This helps account for the readiness of fathers to take on the nurturing of their offspring. There is also research to support the hypothesis that pregnant females who are strongly supported by the alleged father of the fetus experience a more successful pregnancy and are more nurturant when the baby arrives. The presence of the father after a birth, even if he is not actively mothering the baby, is an indicator of the healthy physical and emotional development of the baby—boy or girl. Social practices that have discouraged the participation of the father in caring for the infant are still common in most traditional societies, but the American experiment in coequal parenting ought not provide support for other cultures to abandon practices that are said to prevent females from becoming women who are more like traditional men. Much will depend on what *most* women will want to do with a strong drive to become mothers. This is a social experiment that will require several more generations to provide even basic data on what females really want.

Nurturing the infants they believe they have procreated and providing affection for their pregnant wives (spouses, partners) are not the only evidence for prosocial emotions in males. It

is also a staple of pediatric wisdom that boys are more emotional as infants than girls are. Their moods are more labile and they are harder to console than girls are. The critical periods that follow are to a great extent overseen by social conventions. Here it is chiefly the use of shame and the discouragement of expressions of warmth by boys that carry the day to an even greater extent than encouraging toughness and stoicism. Rough and tumble play appears without solicitation in boys, although it can be encouraged in girls. Play patterns and toy preferences in boys and girls, respectively, speak to biological tendencies. These can be inhibited in boys or encouraged in girls. After puberty, the situation is more under the influence of physiological factors, especially increasing physical size and strength and the presence of testosterone, the effects of which are hardly well understood. The assumption that androgens only promote aggressiveness is likely an exaggeration. They may increase activity levels in boys (and in both sexes, since both males and females produce testosterone, although in very different quantities), but that testosterone, for example, causes all boys to become more destructive as well as more sexually active is a bit of guesswork confounded by conflicting observations in different cultures. The effects of the androgens likely have to do more with geography and climate than with genetics and racial disposition alone. There is the little-known example of the indigenous Tahitian men who when first met showed no competitiveness, ambition, or sexually predatory behavior. Landlocked countries whose residents have experienced fifteen centuries of near subsistence economy may have produced a kind of man who is very different.

These are complicated issues that have been under discussion for many years by social scientists and require more nuanced treatment. For now, it remains only to add a recent guess about the presumed emotionally impoverished lives of boys and men: alexithymia. Like engrossment, the term was coined in 1974, this time by two psychotherapists who claimed that men had less capacity for identifying emotions in themselves and others and finding words for the emotions they did find. The linguistic handicap is questionable, however, given the history of literature, which has been dominated by men, poets especially. There is also the fact that English, the language of the two psychologists, is like all natural languages limited in its emotion vocabulary. The symptom and disorder are more likely related to the tendency of males to show rather than say what they are feeling. For example, a boy who is feeling affection for his mother is more likely to *give* her something than say “I love you, Mommy.” He is more likely to do the same with this father and his friends. It may be that the tradition of males giving females gifts as

signs of love is a consequence of this.

The relation of the myth of the presumably affectively impoverished male and the myth of male power are also related. Here the issue is what society encourages and allows males to express. In most cultures, anger is not inhibited and may even be encouraged in contact sports. It may be the acculturated emotion that prepares men to fight in wars. Here again, though, it is typically for a few powerful males or females that young males especially are groomed to fight. The entertainment of watching males fighting each other (wrestling, gladiatorial combat, jousting) or fighting animals is found in nearly every culture where manhood has been defined and related to masculinity and male physical features, including greater size, muscularity and strength. My point is that absent these *inhibiting* and *encouraging* forces, and absent worries about how to *disinhibit* presumptive innate features of aggressiveness, we will likely see that males are as capable of identifying and speaking what they feel as are females.

CONCLUSION

The three assumptions about males I have discussed require demythologizing. They are related and reinforce each other's influence on how we raise boys in the United States and places where American culture has exerted its influence. Traditional cultures, especially those closely related to religious institutions, have not been affected by these myths. The misunderstandings and irrational responses are deep-lying and will not be resolved politically. Instead, much of what we see emerging on the international political scene will center on our view of males and discovering what is there in males (and females) that is not dependent on the teachings of the three great Abrahamic religions. I am not optimistic about how much will change over the short term, but I am convinced that the critical factor in understanding our humanity must *at this point in history* begin with a close look at males' lives. The well-being of boys and men should be our principal motivation. The global political situation may depend upon it.

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