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The Twisted Backstory of the Straight Male: What Women (*and Men*) May Not Know

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Any gender is a drag...
-Patti Smith

With recent scandals, sexual assault and misogyny have taken center stage in the national conversation. The spotlight on gender has been turned up to full intensity, masculinity is being interrogated and called to account, and the disasters of patriarchal transgression are being vigorously examined. Nonetheless, more heat than light has been generated, and the developmental backstory of the straight male remains shadowy. As a therapist, I'm aware that not all men are equally misogynist, but I would like to describe some plot twists in the psychological development of boys that can contribute to the fear and devaluation of women. Let's begin with a fable:

> *Once upon a time in a land far beyond memory lived a little prince. Born with the potential to grow in ways than could ever be permitted in the kingdom, he gazed lovingly toward a queen-mother. She was beautiful, strong, and protective and he wanted to be like her someday. However, he slowly learned from the king and his courtiers that his destiny was to grow apart from the queen and become like the king.*
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> *Though this would be difficult and take courage, he was promised that one day he would have his own queen. Perhaps this wasn't so bad since the king had great power and influence in the world outside the castle. But how was he to become king-like? He would gradually shapeshift to become as different from his mother as could be. Where she was emotional, he would become stoic. Where she was*

vulnerable and receptive, he would become impenetrable and penetrating. Where she needed others, he would be self-sufficient. Through a little magic he would waive his wand and banish the queen things in himself and become only the king things.

This turned out to be harder than it looked. It was a great loss to just be half of himself and he kept worrying that this other half might return. With the help of little wizardry, he put himself under a spell that made queen things queer and lowly, not really royal at all, even though he secretly longed for this lost world of himself. The trouble was that with all the court rituals the spell kept fading and needed to be constantly recast.

Finally, it came to him. He would strengthen his king-self but keep his queen-self close by in the disguise of the women around him. This way he could keep them close as pets whom he subjugates, domesticate, and try to keep under strict control.

Within the world of this fable, 'masculinity' is perpetually under construction and structurally shaky. Purging himself of any innate characteristics construed of as feminine, the boy gradually becomes a psychic contortionist bending himself into hard- to-maintain shapes. The performance of male identity will necessitate the art of false self, using whatever cultural life offers as wardrobe of disguises to mix and match as the little prince dresses up as a man. Doing so creates a paradoxical situation with a sense of incompleteness on the one hand, and anxiety about the return of the disavowed on the other. This Big Bang of masculine creation sets off a cascading chain reaction of complex twists and turns in the straight male psyche. The aftershocks ripple out in all directions affecting everyone. Women are cast in constricted roles and end up struggling with issues of dis-empowerment and objectification as they deal with male culture. Women may even now sometimes worry about being seen as "unladylike", but this is relatively superficial, and it would be unusual to hear anyone in my practice worry about being a "real woman". By contrast, beneath their blustery facades, the straight man worries whether he has adequately pieced together his masculinity and become a "real" man.

Here are three illustrations from my practice that represent different manifestations of the early childhood process described in the fable as the little prince grows into adult male identity. Please note that to protect confidentiality, I am presenting composite and disguised illustrations.

[In the interest of confidentiality, the following case illustrations has been fictionalized. They are constructed of composites of several patients and multiple real-life scenarios with details altered to ensure anonymity. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.]

Mark

Mark is a 35-year-old litigation attorney who works to defend disenfranchised and vulnerable immigrant clients. He is a decent, skilled, and determined man, and the kind of man you'd want to have on your side when your back is up against the wall. His recreational ('re-creating' his manliness) time is spent with other men in extreme outdoor adventures that test their mettle and grit. He is a devoted father to children from two short marriages, and it's a source of pride for him to be emotionally engaged with them unlike his own distant alcoholic father. Still, he regards himself as a lone wolf. Like many 'lone wolves', he does like to travel in 'bro-packs" of other men but doesn't need them. Self-sufficiency is his castle, but it causes a lot of trouble with women.

Mark entered individual therapy after several couple therapies crashed and burned. His biggest complaint is being chronically at odds with his ex-wives whom he experiences as trying to "bust my balls" and "tie me down" when it comes to alimony, child support, and co-parenting. In relationship with me, he makes it clear he wants just a few tools, and doesn't want to "get all dependent talking about my feelings like a wuss".

Emerging from the fables of the little prince, his masculinity is the strong silent type, a sort of modern edition of the lone cowboy cultural icon. Needing much more than food, shelter, or money is seen as a weakness. As a Don Juan, his need for women has nothing to do with dependence, if he tells himself that he just needs to feed the 'powerful lustful beast' within as a necessary part of his masculine regime of conquest. Having placed all his renounced dependent longings and vulnerabilities into her, she now appears on his

psychic radar as needy and demanding. Consequently, he is unconsciously anxious about orbiting her alluring world without being pulled down by the gravitational force field (which is as much his own longing projected outward as it is the actual woman in question). Thus, he is troubled by his relationships with women, but can at least see them partly as real people. As he would say: “You can’t live with them, and you can’t live without them”.

Kami

Kami is an unusual man who is brilliantly successful in an entrepreneurial field in which his education, his deep multi-cultural immersion in the arts, and his creativity have been crucial to his many civic contributions. He is handsome and charismatic, dresses beautifully, speaks with grace and charm, and is overall quite memorable and engaging.

Kami entered therapy after his wife suffered a fatal accident several years ago. He told me he had not come to grieve, but to rather make sure he wasn’t thrown “off track” by feelings of sadness or loss. It is a challenge to redirect him toward these feelings. He prefers to hold court with me as an admiring audience as he describes his grand projects in exquisite detail and rails against the banality of the ordinary.

Emerging from the fables of childhood, his masculine construction is to become a master of the universe, a sort of lone wolf on steroids, who lives big and has a massive impact. His goal is to have everything, need nothing, and reap the admiration of all. In his story men like himself are fated to bring their rich and extraordinary gifts to an otherwise contemptible world.

As far as romance goes, he steers away, foreswearing love in his quest for the golden ring of supreme achievement. He is bothered by the problems of being a sought-after bachelor in a world of unworthy women. Unlike the lone wolf who can get a glimpse of women as real people, the master of the universe comes in a narcissistic disguise where the goal with other people is to dominate and outshine them.

If there is room for a woman in his life, she is an accessory accentuating his grandeur or perhaps Pygmalion work of art bearing his signature. To shore up his manhood, he must always be number one or experience humiliation. Despite a ruthless work ethic that has taken its toll on his health and despite the isolation caused by alienating others with his grandiosity, competing and winning are the building blocks of his castle of masculinity.

Robert

Robert tells me he is seen as "great guy, very normal" who seems to have everything: an accomplished lovely wife, four well-adjusted bright children, a beautiful home, a career with a bright future, and a circle of friends that love him. He came into therapy after being tempted into having an affair, which is abhorrent to him because his mother had been crushed by his father's affair. Also, he has a chronic sense that even though he has everything, it all feels somehow off. Coming from a progressive academic family, he loathes misogynistic men because he himself is close to and respects so many women. But he still has some subtle and pervasive issues with women that are unconscious and complex. Whereas Mark could see women *partly* as people, and Kami could not see them at all as people, Robert' sees them *almost too much* as people and over-worries about hurting their feelings or getting into trouble. He feels compelled to give a woman what she wants and to suppress his own emotional truth and desire.

Robert follows the path of the little prince in our fable but fears deep in his soul that he went too far in dethroning and disowning the queen, hogging the power and privilege for himself. He then lives within an unconscious sense of guilt and concern that leads him to be what he calls "a woman pleaser". Saying "no" is felt to be "mean", while saying "yes" allows him to make reparation to the fabled queen he has trashed. He is the metrosexual version 2.0 of an older generation of men who spouted the misogynist wisdom of "happy wife, happy life".

However, he then feels trapped and resentful and having everything turns to "wife, children, house, you know, the full catastrophe". On the other hand, this allows him to play the part of the tragic martyred patriarch rather than the dependent little boy he is at

heart. But the silent resentment persists, and he may withdraw rather than engage, nursing his grudges and resentments in private, and leaving her baffled and vexed. Worse still, he may veer toward passive aggressive maneuvers, or affairs with other women which he justifies for what he has so long sacrificed.

The Future

Effective therapy with men always involves the re-integration of emotionality, vulnerability, and other modes that have been walled off as feminine. Increasingly, men can construct more inclusive identities for themselves, identities that should shore up the male insecurity that breeds misogyny.

The binary of masculine and feminine is increasingly untenable as frozen gender boundaries are beginning to melt, merge, and mix, but there is much work ahead. Perhaps we will need a sense of the tragicomedy of gender itself to get through this. To end, I quote again the epigraph for this article, “any gender is a drag”!