

# CODIFICATIONS OF MAN

Handbooks, Guides, and Iron John

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## BEGINNINGS

In many societies, there is the notion that one is not born as a man, nor, as de Beauvoir says of women, does one become one. There is, then, a supreme sense that one rather is made into a man. This process of 'making' a man can take the form in any number of different ways, only one of which will this article look at or address. As the title suggests, the paper at hand will begin by investigating the way masculinity is codified, specifically looking at the vast array of recent handbooks and guides which set out not only qualities of a man, or prescriptions, but also a science for such, and a science for how to become and be made into a

man. In these it sees a way of trying to solidify a masculinity rather than understanding a version of masculinity.

It views these books as devices not merely to re-establish some fictive notion of masculinity, but also to codify the discourse of masculinity under the guise of science; seeking such is a way to acquire the guise of respectability that the scientific community, for some, holds. This article will briefly look at Robert Bly's Iron John story as an example, and exemplar of these guidebooks. While this article does not attempt to investigate the scientific community directly, it sets its aims at the unifying, and universalizing, elements of the

attempt at creating a version of masculinity.



### SCIENCE AS METHOD

It is too easy to cloister the idea of science into its maintenance as a discipline, forgetting that it stretches out beyond these borders through the creation of othering, leaving those outside its grasp as deficient and lacking. As the supposed ‘Scientific Revolution’ blossomed, this process took on strength, treating ‘traditional forms of discovering and validating knowledge as worthless and that they “ought to be discredited and swept away. Through this, the nature of ‘old’ philosophies was often caricatured as to misrepresent their complexity and sophistication” (Shapin, p. 65-66). The erasure of philosophy as a credible intellectual and academic pursuit occurred simultaneously with the supposed advent of science showcases its modus operandi: “[the method of science] is relentless. It never stops” (Figlio, p.7).

While the history and sociology of science has eminently tackled the fact that science is, itself,

supposed as masculine,<sup>1</sup> the imagining beyond this into the application of science as rather a method onto, or upon, masculinity is what this paper will seek to investigate. As such, in its use of the word ‘science’, this paper means to indicate it as method rather than a discipline specifically. Part of this method includes the search for not merely knowledge, but a generalization or universalizability. In seeking out generalizations it seeks to establish rules and usable categories. Beyond this, the drive “to make knowledge as an on-going social practice” is specific to science, in both its disciplinary and methodological modes (Figlio, p.7).

In Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic*, he states that the “science of man”, taking its cues from the “science of life,” had turned from a holistic view of health into one of “the normal and the pathological” (Foucault,

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<sup>1</sup> See: Alison Kelly, ‘The Construction of Masculine Science’, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 6, No 2 (1985); Helen E. Longino, ‘Can there be a feminist Science?’, *Hypatia* Vol 2 Is 3 (1987); and Evelyn Fox Keller, ‘Gender and Science’, in *Discovering Reality*, editors Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004).

1976, p.35-36). In other words, there is implicit in a view of science understood thusly through this binary whereupon one is not merely not something, but is deviant from it. Through this, one can see the codification of masculinity as both an explicit way of putting forward a singular empirical notion as well as castrating as deviant that which strays from it.



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#### MASCULINE CODIFICATIONS

The categories have been created and fortified, put into the deep recesses of a (supposed) shared spirit of humanity. In describing the social situation at the beginning of the 20th century, when Freud came onto the scene, Peter Gay recounts the trend of “subjectivity increasingly

[becoming] scientific” (Gay, p.xxi). Though the 21st century has found any number of committed minds and philosophies that have fought against this entrenched scientificity, it has also found champions at every turn.

In this light one can begin to see the vast variety of manuals, handbooks, guides, and compendiums on how to become a ‘man’ as a fabrication of masculinity; as constructing not merely an “art of manliness” (McKay & McKay) as one book is called, but, rather, as seemingly desirous to perpetuate and assemble a science of masculinity. While these books vary in how gender progressive or regressive they are, they are, in their purpose, pushing to set up ordered rules that explicitly see that which falls within it as ‘normal’; and, in so doing, create a discourse which is premised upon the notion of singularity rather than of multiplicity.<sup>2</sup> Though some of these discourses move outwards

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<sup>2</sup> The acceptance of some deviation from a singular, does not equate to an acceptance of pluralism, it merely means that it sees a multiplicity to that which is accepted under the same rubric or framework, rather than accepting a plurality of frameworks.

from an (overt) essentialism, the scientificity of it remains.

These handbooks seek to observe elements of empiricism, objectivity, as well as universality in different measures. In this way they rely on scientific claims as well as claims of naturalness, which converge in beliefs about the sexes and the scientific basis for these. This all said, it should be rather obvious when understanding that this all, while non-academic, and does not situate itself in literature or the humanities, fits itself under the umbrella of the social sciences. Implicit in the naming is an attachment to the conception of science, and a struggle to gain the equity, and symbolic capital, which is given to science as both a method and a discipline. One could aim the spotlight at many others who, in a similar fashion, are determined to fixate on a fixed conception of masculinity.



#### MAN OF SCIENCE, MAN OF NATURE

In one of its most essentialist and universalized incarnations, one can look to Robert Bly's Iron John and not only the

creation of a singular, but also the emphasis on the naturalness of this, which he ties not merely to spirituality, but also to a 'warrior DNA' inside each man (Bly, p.150). In calling upon DNA, Bly aims to create a nature of masculinity from within a certain science of the body - which is "alive in our genetic structure" (Bly, p.36). Bly furthers his connection to science through the subtle inflection and use of the phrase 'soft male'; indicting this supposed version of man for his softness in comparison to both a rugged manliness, and possibly to the idea of 'hard sciences' versus the 'soft sciences'. Iron John is a parable story that utilizes a varied set of myths and stories to connect a fairy tale vision with the modern man. It is a blend of psychology, mythology, poetry, and morals that is meant to be particularly inspirational and insightful to men in the 20th Century. Its publication in 1990 worked to strengthen the burgeoning 'men's movement', better known as the mythopoetic movement.

Even as Bly calls out for a way to create a unified vision of masculinity, he simultaneously claims it as individualistic (Bly,

p.36). It is here where ideas of a science of masculinity run headlong into the individualist of modern America. In the paradox of a universal singular individual, one can see the figure of Bly's Iron John standing in as not the individual self or subject, but as a mythic figure abstracting the individuals from themselves while simultaneously allowing them access to themselves. Bly sets man then as both an attainable inner self and as an unattainable object removed from them. Coming back here to Foucault, one can say that in this way it creates a deviant, set up as both internal and external, which in that way then becomes part of the creation of the subject himself in the process of subjugation and that functions to seek as a further normalizing effect in the constitution of this image of masculinity (Foucault, 1982, p.781). This production of a deviant establishes in its wake a criminalized set of qualifiers, most frequently in the form of a homophobic discourse. Through the essentializing subject creation, hetero-sexuality is seen not merely as a sexuality, but the sexuality of men.

In setting out this manual, then, Bly is creating a discourse

which is similar in kind to Foucault's vision of the confession: a form of power and knowledge which is bound externally and which seeks to control the idea of truth (Beneke). This then, like social sciences in Foucault, is built upon a series of norm-alizations which attempt to "explain away any anomalies of human nature" and which serve the function of power and institutions (Beneke, p.153). A stable category of masculinity in this way puts forward then not just a science for masculinity, and a normalizing disciplinary tool for men, but also cements further the binary, in Western societies, of the feminine as the negative lens to masculinity that is pushed further outwards and downwards. Bly aims to connect modern (American) man with a masculinity that has been at the bottom of the 'male psyche' for "twenty thousand years" (Bly, p.230). What he fails to understand, in part, is the connection between his notions of 'deep masculinity' with industrialized Western society and the purposing of the individual within the larger structures that situate the subject.



## ENDINGS

In drawing this to a close, it seems important to talk about origins. Karl Figlio, in his book *Psychoanalysis, Science and Masculinity*, says that “Man instantiates a unique situation: the very idea of originality, of being the origin, and therefore the idea of novelty” (Figlio, p.8). Much like this notion of beginnings, one can see many of these guidebooks on masculinity reaching into a past that never existed and creating an origin story that both suits their needs, and speaks to a masculinity which can be biologized through the utilization of a scientific methodology which sees the science it uses as self-evident proof. In a literal sense though, these guidebooks, and Bly’s *Iron John* specifically, put forward an origin myth meant to signify naturalness and universality that puts it beyond question. It claims it is the root, the singular, the source. In a sense it aims to establish itself as part of the natural sciences, part of the empirical, established discourse that guides life.

Attempts at a science of masculinity are not new, they have merely taken new form, shape, and gained a renewed

vigor. One could, as these handbooks do, point to a supposed ‘crisis’ in masculinity, but it is crucial to see the crack running through masculinity itself, and the fact that it is created in such a way as to perpetuate crisis. With a masculinity premised on crisis, it is no wonder that these handbooks find an audience. Men’s interest in these guides is not, like their authors would have you believe, due to a weakened ‘soft man’ which is in need of instruction and reappraisal by empirical examination; rather these discourses are part of a larger process situated inside science and masculinity that preserves and sustains a rigid normative which creates a deviant in its wake, defining the Subject only in light of the Object.

In his *Autobiographical Study*, Freud quotes a line from Goethe, which goes: “In vain you roam around scientifically/ Everyone learns only what he can learn” (Freud, p.4). There is certainly a sense of this feeling running through this article. What emerges though is a recognition of the ways that an attempt is made to constitute masculinity through scientific measures as a means to

legitimacy through utilization of a discourse that situates itself on the border between 'nature' and 'science'. In doing so it attempts at destabilizing one singular vision of masculinity for another.

Stephen Vizinczey wrote that "As a rule, the most dangerous ideas are not the ones that divide people but those on which they agree" (Vizinczey, p.105). While these various handbooks disagree about many things, they all agree on the notion of a masculinity which can be constituted through a set of rules and regulations and which finds its explanation, definition, and approval in what amounts to scientific essentialism. What is truly disconcerting is the agreement that this scientized masculinity has in the wider society, and the ramifications of this for men and women. ◻

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