

## Masculinity versus Femininity?

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When I was invited to write a few lines about the topic of the present issue of *Concordia Discors*, I took a step back and realized that what I usually looked upon as a relation of complementarity should this time be treated in terms of antagonism, in terms of “versus”. Or shouldn’t it? I am little versed in “feminisms” and have always found this masculinity-femininity distinction as necessary for the world to continue to exist..

Naturally, when we say *masculinity* and *femininity*, we do not strictly relate the two concepts to the biological male-female dichotomy but, rather, to sets of attributes, roles and behavioral patterns that have been generally or socio-culturally ascribed to one category or the other, as “man-like” or “female-like”, respectively. (Cf . Geert Hofstede. Web) In the last decades the notion of *gender*, defined as “socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women”<sup>1</sup>, has largely been discussed, and these discussions have both generated and been influenced by a certain socio-cultural momentum, as well as by the creation of university departments devoted to Gender Studies in general, or, more explicitly and restrictively, to Women’s studies, Men’s Studies, or LGBT Studies<sup>2</sup>. LGBT, itself an acronym of “Lesbian Gay, Bisexual and Transgender”, and a few other terms entered

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization definition.

<sup>2</sup> Or even LGBTQ studies, defined as “the academic investigation of sexuality in established fields such as literature, history, theatre, law, medicine, economics, sociology, anthropology and political science. By its very nature LGBTQ studies is interdisciplinary.” (<http://www.colorado.edu/lgbtq/>)

the English specialised vocabulary that relates gender to sexuality. Now they speak of *non-binary gender*, *dfab* (=designated female at birth) or *bigender* (identifying as two genders), and the quasigeneric *transgender*. Being *cisgender* (feeling comfortable with the gender attributes associated to one's own sex) has become just one of a continuum of possibilities... There is no wonder that gender identities are currently described using plural forms, as “femininities” and “masculinities”.

A few years ago I discovered in a private Canadian library a book that drew my attention: *Abused Men. The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence* by Philip W. Cook (Praeger, 1997), a book that enjoyed such success that a second enlarged edition was published in 2009. The statistics detailed in its first chapter are surprising. “Mutual combat is the norm in violent households”. “Women said they hit first 53% of the time, while their partners hit first 42% of the time.” “Four million women a year in the U.S. suffer domestic violence by their partners and 1.8 million women are seriously assaulted. An equal number of men experience domestic violence, with an even greater number (two million) being seriously assaulted.” May this be one of the results of men's and women's “liberation”?

Apart from issues that relate gender to sexuality the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of movements (followed by specific academic studies!) having to do with the traditional social roles, rights and restrictions ascribed to the two genders, i.e., to the social construction of gender. The suffragette movements were only the beginning of a series of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that range from militating for liberation (including men's liberation<sup>3</sup>) from traditional gender roles in patriarchal, androcentric societies, to various radical forms, which occasionally degenerate into hate groups<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Men's liberation movement(s) became manifest in the 70s and evolved towards men's rights activism.

<sup>4</sup> See Perry 2000 and “Hate group”. *Wikipedia*. Web.

Socially, the period of second-wave feminism that started in the 60s came as a late reaction against the renewed domesticity of women after the Second World War and the subsequent baby boom<sup>5</sup>. Parenthetically speaking, let me mention as an eloquent example of this “renewed domesticity” the creation of *La Leche League* in the late 50s (1956), currently having a presence in 68 countries as *La Leche League International*. At the opposite end one can mention “the fight against bras” as a form of protest against the “social imposition” of this piece of underwear. While both moments were essentially health-oriented, both displayed extreme forms, such as breastfeeding a 7-year-old child or the infantile gesture of throwing one’s bra in the street.

Academically, it produced a number of notable books, some of which were bestsellers. Having an illustrious predecessor in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous book *The Second Sex* (1949), *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963) enjoyed tremendous success, many of the issues tackled in it being still highly topical. Let me mention here just one of these issues, namely, the discussion of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs and the overall observation that women’s needs have generally been reduced by their “counterparts” to the physiological level, although women, too, have all the other higher needs, including

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<sup>5</sup> The term baby-boom refers to the considerably increased birth-rate after WW II (approximately between 1946 and 1964). Despite the association of the baby boomers’ generations with a rejection or redefinition of traditional values; the continuity of values with older and younger generations has never ceased to exist. As C.S. Lewis remarked in his series of three lectures entitled *The Abolition of Man* delivered during WW II, “we may well thank the beneficent obstinacy of real mothers, real nurses, and (above all) real children for preserving the human race in such sanity as it still possesses.” However, “the man-molders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please.” (Lewis 1999:37)

self-actualization. She also maintains that men and women are not enemies but, rather, fellow victims, since men, too, have been affected by an outmoded masculine mystique that has invested them with the stereotypical role of hunters outside the household. As for women, they struggle hard to break out of the confines of their domestic straightjacket, and their liberation may as well lead to the liberation of men rather than to domestic conflicts as long as they do not turn into man-haters.

They currently speak of a third wave of feminism, having more to do with identity than with a distinct theoretical age group. Generally, as Harnois (2003) critically remarked, “feminist scholarship has, in effect, reified distinct, static waves of feminism” and usually reproduces “the very differences it aims to understand”.<sup>6</sup> In reality, we can see again and again a complex dynamic that defies any constraints. An excellent set of notes available on the internet is worth mentioning at this point:

- In everyday language, femininities and masculinities do not map onto biological sex. In any one culture, certain behaviors or practices may be widely recognized as “feminine” or “masculine,” irrespective of whether they are adopted by women or by men. Femininities and masculinities are not descriptors of sexual orientation.
- Femininities and masculinities are plural—there are many forms of femininity and many forms of masculinity. What gets defined as feminine or masculine differs by region, religion, class, national culture, and other social factors. How femininities and masculinities are valued differs culturally.
- Any one person — woman or man — engages in many forms of femininity and masculinity, which she or he adopts (consciously or unconsciously) depending on

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<sup>6</sup> Also see Freedman 2003, Harnois 2008, MacLean 2008.

context, the expectations of others, the life stage, and so forth. A man can engage in what are often stereotyped as “feminine” activities, such as caring for a sick parent.

- Cultural notions of “feminine” and “masculine” behavior are shaped in part by observations about what women and men do. This kind of “gender marking” tends to discourage women or men from entering “gender-inauthentic” occupations (Faulkner, 2009).
- Femininities and masculinities are learned.<sup>7</sup> Messages about “feminine” and “masculine” behaviors are embedded in advertising, media, news, educational materials, and so forth. These messages are present in a range of environments, from the home to the workplace to public spaces.” (Schiebinger *et al.* Web.)

The question is: is there anything that goes beyond variation determined by region, religion, class, national culture, and other social factors apart from the biologically determined behaviours? If we are to give credit to the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, a discussion of the notions of *animus* and *anima* finds its place here. Whereas humans are biologically – and superficially – defined as men or women, at the psychological level they are hybrids to different degrees. Jung postulates the existence of two anthropomorphic archetypes at the level of the unconscious mind and relates them to the process he calls *individuation*. The unindividuated man will identify with those attributes that are symbolically masculine and will deny his *anima*, that is, the personification of all feminine psychological tendencies within (mainly of an emotional, diffuse, intuitive or “soul” nature), and will project those tendencies onto women. Similarly, a woman will have her inborn image of man,

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<sup>7</sup> ...and, consequently, time-bound, space-bound, culture-bound, social-ladder-bound, functionally-bound, context-bound... (R.A.)

not realising that this cluster of man-like features (most often related to logos, rationality, firmness, action) lies dormant within herself. When these inborn tendencies rise to the surface through individuation, they may become manifest in a positive way materialised in tenderness, patience and compassion in the case of men and in rationality, action, accomplishment, possibly a successful career in the case of women. On the negative side the process can be complicated either by the display of the “negative anima” (e.g., moodiness, oversensitivity to hurt feelings) or “negative animus” (destructive tendencies, aggressive assertiveness, fight for having “the last word”) or by the impact of cultural influences. Under the influence of 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberation movements, we currently witness a degeneration of the masculine energy in men and of femininity in women. It is not my purpose to go into the depth of the *animus-anima* issue, yet I assume (1) that acknowledging our psychological hybridity is different from the present-day confusion, and (2) that humans are in need of preserving the dynamic balance between the two energies.

The word *energy*, which was naturally inserted in the previous paragraph, brings me to another level of our discussion, which has to do with the unperceivable forces that keep everything going in a manifest universe. It brings me to the space of Oriental Antiquity where it was postulated that the presence of anything in existence is due to the presence of two polar forces or energies that (inter)act in a kind of relative dynamic balance. Any imbalance leads to another type of relative dynamic balance and, consequently, to new forms of manifestation. Whereas the term Tao (also transliterated as Dao) appeared in an attempt to describe a state of existence before anything happened and before time or space, the concept Tao incapsulates both the *yin* and the *yang* principles as archetypal potentialities. The Tao involves balance, harmony and the union of opposites. Their separation and

interaction represent the way of the manifest world. Despite the polarity of the two forces, each contains the other in embryo. It is a truism to state that *yin* is associated with femininity and *yang* with masculinity. The very names originally signified “the shady side of the hill” and “the sunny side of the hill”, respectively, which suggests the complementarity of the opposites as sides of the same hill. Neither has a meaning of its own without the other. The complementary pair abounds in the whole universe and ensures the dynamic tension for any form of motion or change. In a human perspective, this is manifest in the sacred union between a man and a woman who, together, tend to recreate the original androgynal couple<sup>8</sup>. Let us add that spiritualism, as well as occultism of various sources, occasionally goes beyond the discourses of patriarchal religion, the Creator often being It or That<sup>9</sup> rather than He, and, occasionally again, it is the great Mother Goddess that begets anything in creation.

A 20<sup>th</sup>-century instance of theorising from the subjective perspective of a poet upon the figure of the Mother Goddess as the “White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death” is Robert Graves’s book-length study *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948). The book is particularly based on the Celtic

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<sup>8</sup> The complementary pair can be found in every detail, no matter how “micro” or “macro” it is. A very concrete example is the association of a *yin* organ with a *yang* organ in the human body, each such pair corresponding to a pair of energy meridians, as well as to a specific cluster of emotional tendencies.

<sup>9</sup> Here is an excerpt from a recent speech of Sri Vasudeva, a spiritual leader and author from Trinidad Tobago: “In the Christian Bible for example, we hear, ‘In Him’ - I would transform that so instead of saying ‘Him which is gender oriented – ‘In That I live, move and have my being.’ Or as the Hindus would say, ‘Aham Brahmasmi.’ Aham, my ‘I,’ Brahmasmi, is nothing but a divine existence. My ‘I’ is in That, from That, exists in That.” (29 March 2016) Let us note that “degendering” God is possible in English, but the grammatical features of Romanian do not allow this. It is either ACELA or ACEEA. The structure of the language is such that the semantic dichotomy [+MALE] vs. [+FEMALE] cannot be transcended.

mythologic tradition of Wales and Ireland, but can also be read in a broader key as it reechoes universal myths.<sup>10</sup> “The Great Divine Mother”, the primordial cosmic energy, is equated in some forms of Hinduism to Shakti, the counterpart of Shiva, the begetter and supporter of anything in creation. Shakti herself represents a spectrum of ten aspects of feminine divinity – the ten *Mahavidyas* (Great Wisdoms). All ten forms of the Goddess are worshipped as the universal Mother and their manifestations range from terrible to very gentle. Of these ten *Mahavidyas* extremely interesting is Kali, the energy of Time, the divine power that governs the never-ending transformation in the universe. It is an essential aspect of Shakti, symbolizing the inherent creative and destructive sides identifiable in all processes. Time is the dimension sine qua non in manifestation, but it appears as a terrible force, and, consequently, its symbolic embodiment as Kali includes many terrifying aspects, which are in many other cases associated with male brute force.

When legendary Cuchulain, the embodiment of heroic masculinity in the Irish tradition, is involved in heroic battle, he is strangely activated by *furor sacer*, which endows him with preternatural powers that enable him to be the victor despite his very young age. The story is similar to that of many other ancient demigods and to that of the many heroes in the Romanian fairy tales we are familiar with. But, coming down to earthly matters, isn't the violence of domestic behaviour a simulacrum of the sacred fury of ancient heroes manifested on a daily basis against one's feminine counterpart?

On the other hand, revengeful femininity is not only a phenomenon specific to extreme feminism in modern times. A reversal of what we usually consider to be the ascribed gender roles is obvious in the ancient stories about Amazons, and such

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<sup>10</sup> James Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* (1922) seems to have been another source for Graves' s argument in favour of the idea of goddess worship as the prototypical religion.



stories are not restricted to the Greek and Roman tradition. The characters of the old Irish sagas, for instance, either male or female, can be equally cruel, revengeful, or just “beyond good and evil”, which reminds us of the characteristics ascribed by the Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats to Helen of Troy...

Since I mentioned the Irish space, allow me to confess that Yeats is an author whose complex work took me many years to begin to understand in depth. His growth parallels – and indirectly illustrates – the spectacular transformations in gendered behaviours at the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. He started both as a “white, Protestant, middle-class man, of the British Empire” and as an Irishman, and witnessed the deep advances for the rights of women: in 1870 the Married Women’s Property Act passed; the 1904-1914 Suffragette movement ended in the final victory of 1918, when women were granted the right to vote; men started being afraid that in the long run their counterparts would take revenge upon their male oppressors... However, Yeats “moved in circles sympathetic to emancipation” (Cullingford 1996 :7). He “loved, liked, collaborated with, and respected women – most of the time. He encouraged their intellectual and creative work, assumed their professional competence, chose them as allies. His best friends were all women” (Cullingford 1996: 9). Apart from that he spent many years studying and practising the Occult.

It is no wonder that, in the course of time, he created such different texts as the poems marked by Medieval-like chivalry and the Romantic haze of the beginnings and later poems like *No Second Troy* (1916), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and the *Crazy Jane* poems, of which *Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop* (1933) is a transparent expression of female sexuality. Yet, beyond all that, there is that yearning for the unity of opposites that is explicit in some of Yeats’ works (also see *A Vision*) and that has marked the cultural history of the world in many ways,

starting from Heraclitus, going through the Platonic myth of Aristophanes about the three original “spheres” that had been cut into halves ever striving to reunite (cf. *Symposium*), through neoplatonic and alchemic views, and reaching Jung’s view again. We have mentioned Tao and could equally add Tantric Hinduism, Buddhism or Sufism and probably other mystic traditions in which the revelation of the unity of all things in existence is present despite – or just because of – the presence of two opposite forces of various names: centrifugal and centripetal, ascending and descending, emissive and receptive, active and passive, sunny and shaded, masculine and feminine..

Instead of a conclusion, why not opt for *masculinity AND femininity* as two sides of one coin, whatever the perspective, biological, psychological, social, spiritual, cosmogonic or cosmologic, ontological or epistemological? The ideal at the human level would be the integration and balance of the masculine and feminine both within oneself and in the relationship with others. However...<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ...The story goes on. *Concordia discors*... Quite significantly, as I was adding these last lines to my essay, I discovered a book that had been launched a few days before: Alina Hurubean (ed.), *Feminin-masculin. Povestiri de carieră-viață*. Institutul European, 2016. It includes sixteen essays (life stories) with attractive titles such as “The Sunday girl” (by Cristina Neamțu), „Reflections in the mirror” (by Dana Bădulescu) and “Beyond myth. A masculine experience at the end of the millennium” (by Arnaldo Spallacci), reads easily and offers a variety of subjective perspectives on the subject.

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