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MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY TODAY



EDITED BY

ESTER PALERM MARI
AND FRANCES THOMSON-SALO

FOR THE COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND PSYCHOANALYSIS



MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY TODAY

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*Ester Palerm Marí and
Frances Thomson-Salo*

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INTRODUCTION

Ester Palerm Marí and Frances Thomson-Salo

Masculinity and femininity today

A wide range of authors have contributed to this book, sometimes integrating theoretical points in quite novel ways, sometimes making quite controversial points which are likely to stir lively debate; in doing so, the authors have enabled us to reflect further on issues of masculinity and femininity today.

This book addresses what is currently understood by “masculinity” and “femininity” in psychoanalytic terms. As Glocer Fiorini (2007) reminds us: “In the field of psychoanalysis, there is no single perspective on sexual difference or on the concepts of masculinity and femininity” (p. 122); and “The tendency to consider femininity as a problematic topic derives from the theories concerning the sexual difference” (p. 130). The book addresses two perspectives: the first is to what extent the characteristics of both are present in each individual, and how they can be recognised in patients of both sexes. From the second perspective the authors, taking into account “masculinity” and “femininity” as present in the analyst, whether they are male or female, consider how this reflects in their analytic work and what limitations

this may imply in the development of the “feminine” analytic function in a male analyst, and vice versa.

Michael Diamond, in “Evolving perspectives on masculinity and its discontents: Reworking the internal phallic and genital positions”, gives an overview of psychoanalytic understanding of masculinity and male development, clarifying what he means by phallic and genital masculinity, and focuses on the internalisation processes impacting masculine gender identity. He then reflects on the interplay between the male’s initial sense of masculinity, his uniquely gendered ego ideal, and the central developmental challenges in reworking the phallic and genital positions, making reference to developing an interiorised dimension of genital masculinity to do with the inner body that reflects the more open and receptive aspects of male psychic experience. He questions the Freudian hypothesis that the male child must disidentify with the mother, and identify with the father in order to separate from the mother. The boy’s separation from his mother is achieved with the aid of his father; through the father-son relationship the child is helped to separate from his mother, not in opposition to femininity, but rather through the love he has for his father, assisted by the ability his father has to facilitate the new bond with him, containing the anxiety inherent in this process. In other words, a process of differentiation and progressive separation takes place that permits the boy’s masculinity to be founded on a reciprocal identification with an available father and with a mother who is capable of admitting and affirming her son’s masculinity. That is to say, a couple capable of recognising and loving their son.

In the young adult these traits are associated with assertiveness, strength, potency, the achievement of wishes and ambitions, and competitive cravings. All of these are fundamental for the accomplishment of one’s ambitions. In a more developed process, this is complemented by the masculine capacity to confer the same importance to the partner’s satisfaction as to one’s own satisfaction, and the faculty of achieving a bond and intimacy with others becomes more significant. When defensive aspects predominate, a character disorder may be present to protect the frail and inflexible masculine identity that defines itself by a self-demonstration of exhibitionism and arrogance; the masculine attributes are then considered more of an instrument of aggression than of love, and imply recklessness, misogyny, and an excessive need to demonstrate one’s own abilities. In other words, a man’s rejection of his

“feminine” self indicates a failure at optimal development, and a denial of his capacity to be nurturing and to procreate.

Giovanna Ambrosio, while still finding some common ground with aspects of Diamond’s conceptualisation, critiques aspects of this paper quite vigorously from a different theoretical approach. She puts forward that a mature genital organisation requires the complete recognition of oneself and of the other in his/her totality. This is an ideal for men as much as it is for women. She points out the importance of differentiating between the most primitive levels that precede the organisation of individuation and, therefore, from the identification of later degrees of identity. She also points out the clinical importance of differentiating between the more primitive degrees of identity, where the child imitates mother or father, and the more mature feeling of identity, which is the product of the never-ending process of introjection, organisation, and integration that arises from the bond and the interaction with the father and the mother.

James Rose, in his contribution, “The hour of the stranger” focuses in a more clinical paper on how adolescents discover their sexuality and come to “own” their sexual bodies as they grow towards adulthood. He speaks to the impact made on the adolescent by a body that is not recognised, and the flowering of sensations where the body, mind, sexuality, and identity undergo changes and acquire new dimensions. In addition to two clinical vignettes—of an adolescent girl and an adolescent boy respectively—he draws widely on references to English and to French literature, and, by way of illustration, specifically to the protagonists of the novel by Colette, *Le Blé en Herbe*. The writer describes two children in this novel—a boy and a girl—who, having grown up together, and shared in the same play, suddenly erupt into adolescence, which separates them and changes everything between them for evermore. They become aware that not only has their concept of their own bodies changed, but also their idea of the body of the opposite sex. The idea of the complementarity of the sexes appears here. The two sexes must take into their awareness of themselves the fact of their sexual bodies, and also the possibility of a new relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

The commencement of adolescence, as announced by the appearance of puberty, represents a disruption in development because the individual experiences the possibility and likelihood of something new

and radically different in life. When adolescents, therefore, ask an adult for help, it means that they are willing to face the consequences of an encounter with the stranger within themselves and within the other. This willingness is not conscious, but must be expressed in the anxiety that their call for help awakens. They will frequently say that it is difficult for them to talk about themselves. Their desire to remain in silence reflects the desire to keep a sense of self, and also their fear that their sense of self will be subverted if they open up to the other person. We are dealing with a self which is being shaped, and that protects itself from intrusion, and not necessarily from fear of intimacy, as could be the case with an adult. We could say that adolescents are in the process of “getting to know themselves”, and that they do not want this process compromised by an adult who believes he or she will be able to understand them before they can understand themselves.

Antònia Grimalt, in a discussion of this, further explores what is understood by masculinity and femininity in current psychoanalytic terms, highlighting the adolescent discovery of sexuality and the process of mentalisation of his/her body, and particularly the concrete presence of an absence. Grimalt also considers how “masculine” and “feminine” reflect in analytic work and the limitations this may imply in the development of the “feminine” analytic function or the “masculine” analytic function, depending on whether the analyst is a woman or a man. She points out the importance of primary relationships, and the consequences of problems in these early bonds. The child who has not experienced the necessary mental security to differentiate from the primary object will remain submerged in a world dominated by the emotional processes of the other. She nuances the need to differentiate, in adolescence, between the *no communication* put to the service of having one’s own experience and preserving a sense of self in a creative process of differentiation, from an activity of adolescent withdrawal and fantasising closer to sensorium and in the service of recreating a lost fusion. Emotional disorder is the consequence of the dissociation between the feminine and masculine elements of the personality—one part that cannot contain the other, and vice versa. If this dissociation is not resolved then the sensorial relationship with no affective implication is sought out, or the search for a relationship altogether is inhibited.

Jacqueline Amati Mehler explores, in her chapter “The abyss of intimacy”, some of the problems encountered in male sexuality, and in

particular as they manifest in male impotence. She expounds on the importance that sensuality (associated with the pleasure that the sense organs provide) and affects be integrated into human relationships. A failure in this integration results in splitting and, in consequence, sensual aspects and affects, and sexual desire, will seek gratification in different objects.

Martina Burdet Dombald expands on “Lack of discrimination as a defence mechanism”, making use of a recent novel that enjoyed wide popularity, and the example of a very successful pop star, both of which exhibit confused and undifferentiated masculine and feminine traits. She analyses situations where it appears that no clear discrimination between masculinity and femininity exists, that is, situations in which there is a denial of sexual differences. This cult of undifferentiated-ness can, in neurotic patients, represent the manner in which the mental apparatus protects itself when facing anxieties of exclusion and differentiation, or, conversely, reflect the greatest of all anxieties—that of fragmentation or, in borderline pathology, of not existing.

Teresa Haudenschild in “Listening to psychical bisexuality in analysis” discusses the analyst having a sufficiently elaborated psycho-bisexuality, that is, “a good internalised parental couple”, which presupposes the differentiation of gender and generations. By means of the analyst’s own internal reference, the internal “faults” of the patients may be discerned: insufficient internalisation of a maternal or paternal figure—insufficiencies often due to transgenerational factors—to “faults” in the make-up in the mental structure of the parents of these patients.

Rui Araújo Oliveira considers, in “Masculinity and the analytic relationship”, in particular the transforming of masculinity in the course of the analysis, from identification with the mother to identification with a father figure. He points out that development of a masculine identity is facilitated by the good quality of early relationships between the boy and his mother, and not by the quality of his separation from the mother. The establishment of masculinity begins with the appearance of the third person—the father. This appearance initially begins as contact with the “father in the mind of the mother”. This can start even before the mother realises it, when she presents herself as “the mother-wife-of-the-father”.

Emilce Dio Bleichmar, in her paper “Intersubjective context of gender and sexuality”, defends the concept of gender as a broad and

complex self structure, shaped from the beginning by the unconscious intersubjective interchange between the parental figures and their sons and daughters. She says that for this reason it is advisable to broaden the way in which the analyst listens to patients, and to tune in better to the manner in which women speak about restrictions to self and the difficulties which they encounter when they make the decision to differentiate themselves from the feminine model that their mothers represent. She indicates the importance of listening to and separating this anxiety from oedipal conflicts.

Lastly, there are two chapters on child psychoanalysis. In the first, in a paper, "Identity: A constellation of emotional experience and metaphors in childhood", Irene Oromí presents her young child patient's struggle with issues regarding developmentally appropriate but potentially pathological sexuality, all of which she conveys in a very vivid and moving way. She begins with the symptomatology of a boy with difficulties in concentrating and learning, who played only with girls, being hit and debased by other boys, and traces his early development in order to understand his difficulties in building up an awareness of self and a gender identity. She shows how, during his development, the process of his sense of identity was affected when his bodily sensations were not linked to the emotion that the presence of his parents caused in him. This failure brought about an enclave in the boy's mental organisation, thus predisposing to development of a false identity. As a child analyst, she considers that the question is not what masculinity or femininity is, but rather to understand the case individually with each patient's motivations and suffering.

In the second chapter, in a paper entitled "Furious with love: Some reflections on the sexuality of a little girl", Majlis Winberg Salomonsson presents three sessions of analysis to show us how infantile sexuality appears at this stage of development, drawing for her understanding on some illustrations taken from childhood stories. In the first session she shows how, through play, the child exhibits phallic aspects, and how these influence her masculine and feminine identifications, as well as the presence of the primary scene in play. At the same time she raises the issue of how to capture these identifications in the analytic relationship. The second session takes place while the child sleeps. This does not prevent the analyst, who makes use of her child patient's associations to the story of Sleeping Beauty, from practicing her analytic function,