

Is the Idea of Masculinity Worth Saving?

Yes

L A U R A K I P N I S

The masculine person is not someone going around wearing shoes they cannot walk in for more than a block. The classic masculine pursuits—hunting, fixing your car, throwing a ball—cannot really be performed in heels. The philosopher William James said the masculine virtues have historically derived from going to war or going to work; the Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield says it's about confidence in risky situations. Wrong and wrong. The quintessential masculine virtue is simply an unwillingness to put on immobilizing footwear. When you see a masculine person in a physically restricting accessory—straitjacket, ankle monitor—you can be fairly confident it's not voluntary.

From these observable social facts, we derive the insight that a masculine consciousness favors liberty over bondage. Now, the pathways toward human emancipation have never been straightforward. No one would argue that the history of masculinity has not been one of conquest, rape, plunder, and so on: I'm not trying to paint a rosy picture. I'm just pointing out that *self*-restriction has not typically been masculinity's default setting. It is, by contrast, femininity's calling card, and self-hobbling shoes aren't the half of it. Bodily liberty isn't nothing, especially when the fractional quotient of it previously possessed by women and other childbearing humans is currently being razed away, state by state.

Which is among the reasons that, if masculinity and femininity are construed as polarities and I had to pick one, masculinity is the preferable option. Ditching the whole conception of binary gender is always an option, but in the current schema, getting the fuck outta Dodge, hitting the open seas, or seizing whatever remnants of rebellion you can from the maws of the oppressors and storming the palace—also impossible in heels—remain masculinity's domain.

Needless to say, masculinity is not only the province of biological men. It's distributed among the sexes, though perhaps not equally. Plenty of women wear comfortable shoes—even to the office, despite the fact that “power dressing” apparently still demands heels. This very credulity about “power dressing” is the essence of feminine consciousness, in which immobility is empowering and cultivating hotness is a long-term self-marketing strategy. Masculinity may have its downsides, but femininity is civilization's longest-running scam. When they tie the legs of horses together to stop them from straying, at least they don't call it “power dressing.”

Now, you may argue that four-inch heels represent the femininity of capitalist patriarchy, and you'd be right. But they're still a choice, one that the masculine person eschews. I understand that it isn't beneficial for people identifying as women when femininity is associated with negative traits like self-repression and masculinity with positive ones like freedom. But indictments of masculinity have become so mandatory that you can't go five minutes without hearing some bien-pensant going on about mansplaining and manspreading. How about a hat tip for masculinity's salutary daily reminder that at least some forms of surplus repression can be refused?

A memory: Years ago I was at some academic event and ended up at a bar with a woman I didn't know. She was writing a book about bisexuality, I recall. It was winter, and she was wearing white Levi's and black boots, which I found daring, having apparently internalized some useless feminine prohibition about which months the wearing of white is permissible. We fell into mutual griping about the bottomless correctitude the feminism of our circles seemed devoted to. So many rules, so many rebukes! Free-range imagination was increasingly regarded as a masculinist operation. What might be called “the feminization of culture” had hardly reached its current apogee—who knew then how mainstream and corporate-liberal the culture patrols would become? At least queer theory was still some small refuge from political propriety, though it too would be overtaken by sensitivity police.

Somehow it emerged that we both guiltily loved the Lynyrd Skynyrd song “What's Your Name?” Obviously no feminist should like this song about a guy in a band spending the night with a woman whose name he doesn't remember. On his way out of town the next morning—“It sure was grand!”—he offers to get her a taxi, gallantly promising to see her again when the band comes back the following year.

There's something about the rollicking good-old-boy exuberance of this dumb song I never get tired of. The same for my conversation mate. I'm pretty sure neither of us identified with the “little girl.” No, we wanted to be on the road, getting in brawls and having sex with groupies whose names we didn't know, in lieu of the cosseted little world we called home. At least we wanted a hall pass for that corner of our psyches, and the pleasurable perversity of loving a song by a bunch of Southern longhairs with horrible politics singing odes to discarded women.

We wanted mobility, imaginative or otherwise, and unreconstructed masculinity is still its emblem.

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