Male Perspectives in Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" and Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9109-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9109-7

To my husband, Elis, my soul, my heart, my life.
To my son, Tommaso, for the smiles he gives me every day.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to many people who helped me through this book. Firstly, I would like to thank Professor Roberta Facchinetti, Head of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the University of Verona, and Professor Daniela Carpi, Coordinator of the Doctoral Program in English Studies at the University of Verona at the time I was progressing my PhD course. I would also express my deepest gratitude to Professor Chiara Battisti who supported and encouraged me in the process of selection and editing. Her wise guidance mentored me along the road to understand how human nature works and gave me the freedom to find my research interests.

I am also grateful to Roxanne Barbara Doerr for her precious feedback and enthusiastic support. Her thoughtful questions and comments were valued greatly.

Above all, I would like to thank my parents, Roberto and Renata, who raised me with endless patience and love, my sister, Chiara, my mother-in law, Gabriella, and my sister- in- law, Edi, who helped me in spite of all the time this project took me away from home.

Finally, my special thanks go to my husband, Elis, my life, who has supported me in everything I have ever done or gone through, and my son, Tommaso, the apple of my eyes. They have a faith in me that outshines everything. They all kept me going and this book would not have been possible without them. I can barely find the words to express all the love I have for them.

I beg forgiveness of all those who have been with me over the course of the years and whose names I have failed to mention here.

INTRODUCTION

> *"Story demands sadism, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end".*
> (Teresa de Lauretis)

Over the centuries, fantasy has always produced images and stories that enshrine and mirror individuals' innermost psychic realities. Fairy tales, for instance, represent the purest expression of the collective unconscious and foster possible explanations of universal patterns in the human psyche. They also challenge all archetypical energies and convey the shifting dynamics between two grand prototype forces, the masculine and the feminine, as they manifest in the collective -as well as in the individual- realm.

Following the literary tradition of fourteenth-century Florence -based on short stories drawing on the genre of the *novella*- fairy tales reached the peak of their evolution with the works of seventeenth-century writer Charles Perrault and other French authors such as Henriette Julie de Murat and Catherine Bernard, who contributed to the spreading of these tales as a genre.[1] Reproduced in a multiplicity of discourses, fairy tales have enjoyed an astonishing popularity -especially in North America and Europe- in the second half of the twentieth century. In this light, while maintaining their predominantly fantastic features and characterisation, postmodern fairy tales have been "manipulated" and adjusted to accomplish diverse social functions in several contexts. In this respect, Cristina Bacchilega (1997) posits that

> […] the "classic" fairy tales is a *literary* appropriation of the older folktale, an appropriation which nevertheless continues to exhibit and reproduce some *folkloric* features. As a "borderline" or transitional genre, it bears the traces of orality, folkloric tradition, and socio-cultural performance, even when it is edited as literature for children or it is marketed with little respect for its history and materiality. And conversely, even when it claims

[1] See Zipes, Jack. 2006. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. New York: Routledge.

> to be folklore, the fairy tale is shaped by literary traditions with different social uses and users. (3)

The "different social uses and users" refer to the effect of duplication that contemporary revisions operate at a textual level, which Jack Zipes (1994: 13) defines as "antimythic" because they undermine fairy tales' original structure and themes. In this light, the concept of doubleness, on which postmodern fairy tales are based, expresses the various interpretations of the term "revision", i.e. duplication, doubling, repetition, and reproduction.[2]

Bacchilega's interest in fairy tales' modifications can be seen as the result of the postmodern deconstruction of gender roles in that, as Daniela Carpi (2011: 39) argues, "it is necessary to deconstruct it [fairy tale] with an act of revision and, later, of rewriting that is above all a social act pointing at the necessity and possibility of social transformation". On these premises, Bacchilega (1997) adds that the re-viewing of traditional fairy tales has led to their merging into gender roles' "reconsideration":

> […] the rewriting need not be simply a stylistic or ideological updating to make the tale more appealing to late twentieth-century adult audiences. […] it involves substantive though diverse questioning of both narrative construction and assumptions about gender. […] this kind of rereading does more than interpret anew or shake the genre's ground rules. It listens for the many "voices" of fairy tales as well, as part of a historicizing and performance-oriented project. (50)

The "voices of fairy tales" are thus gendered and, in most cases, promiscuous, as they present archetypal structures whose main feature is their diachronic effect on the audience. Indeed, they must be understandable over time and creep into the diverse sensibilities of individuals by expressing the endless recurrences that gender roles have encompassed since the beginning of human life on Earth.

The challenge that the aforementioned archetypal structures entail is the resolution of the everlasting contraposition between "male" and "female", the two opposite energies on which the discourse on gender

[2] Bacchilega argues that "Zipes provides a tentative typology of the 'contemporary American fairy tale' in the last chapter of *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. He also emphazises the doubleness of these revisions and their varying ideological functions by playing out the various meanings of 'duplication' as reproduction, repetition, and doubling", (*Postmodern Fairy Tales, Gender and Narrative Strategies*, p. 151).

finds its avatar roots. As shown in the first chapter, in order to deeply appreciate and understand the operational system by means of which the internal structures of fairy tales work, the primary element to consider is how gender discourse has developed over time.

Heteronormative interpretations and critics of gender roles represent one the most relevant analyses that characterise Plato's philosophical doctrine. To this point, indeed, Wendy Brown (1988) posits that

> Plato's sexing of an important but ambiguous strain of his epistemological arguments does not mean that he is feminist […]. Rather […] Plato engages with critique of the socially male modes of thinking, speaking, and acting prevalent in his epoch and milieu. […] insofar as his assault upon the masculinist features of Greek culture is partial, equivocal, and bound by antinomies that he revalues but does not jettison, Plato raises a problem that he ultimately cannot settle, a critique whose resolution he cannot provide. (594)

The impossibility to solve the antinomies that bind the male/female dichotomy represents the focal assumption on which Plato forges his "gendered philosophy". Furthermore, Brown argues that in the first book of the *Republic*, Plato widens his theory on duplicity and applies it to politics, showing that "agonistic power politics and sophistic political discourse are two faces -actually the body and the voice- of a single ethic". (597)

This conceptualisation aptly applies to the male and female distinction since men and women belong to a single organism, i.e. mankind. This notwithstanding, for Plato the differentiation of the "two sides of the medal" remains the crucial element of the analysis:

> […] Plato opposes some, by no means all, conventions of masculinity, and he perpetuates some of the most sever elements of Greek misogyny even while lancing others. He does not reject or cast aside the traditional masculine virtues of the Greeks – temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. To the contrary, he repeatedly defines, refines, and defends these virtues. […] To the extent that the characterological distinction between female and male has already begun to be explained in terms of a division between creatures ruled by mind and those ruled by body. (598)

Moreover, Brown points out that Plato's re-interpretation of the male/female opposition reveals its grand impact on gender discourse in that

> […] Athenian masculine practises are thus complicated by their equivocal character and because these challenges are delivered not from the standpoint of masculinity's "opposite", that is, femininity, but from somewhere more ambiguous, shifting, and fraught with tension. […] Thus for Plato to cast the problem of philosophy and politics in terms of gender is a sign that a radical conceptual reordering of the human universe is in store. Plato's subversion of conventional assumptions about gender is deployed to disturb a larger web of assumptions about political life and political endeavor. (598-599)

Keeping Plato's subversion of conventional definitions of gender in mind, it would be worth analysing the concept of dualism in fairy tales for, in most cases, folk culture retains aspects of earlier worldviews and discourses.

As seen above, the split between male and female represents one of the most ancient forms of dualism. For instance, after Plato, the body/mind division continued to be a crucial issue for European Christians at the threshold of Middle Ages indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 54) suggests, "[w]ithin the Christian tradition, the separation of mind and body was correlated with the distinction between what is immortal and mortal". Inevitably, this view contributed to the demonization of sexuality, for it was supposed to taint the immortal soul by tempting the mortal body. The body/mind dichotomy, as Alexandra Howson (2005) highlights, finds one of its sources in the historical periods in which social changes led to grand redefinitions of concepts such as culture, nature, and society itself, more precisely,

> [t]he period between the sixteenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries was characterized by rapid and extensive social change in relation to the nature of knowledge and the social position of women, as well as by broader shifts in the meaning of culture, nature, and civil society. (158)

In the same context, in the seventeenth century, Descartes passes down to philosophy one of the largest intellectual legacies with regard to "dualism", since folklorists sustained that it helped set the stage for many concerns explored in fairy tales. In this light, as Holly Tucker[3] puts it, the Cartesian perspective in France "[…] was utilized to restrict French women from intellectual realms based on their bodies' reproductive functions, [which] in turn influenced the tales they composed and shared".

[3] See Tucker, Holly. 2003. *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France*. Detroit: Wayne State University.

In addition, Patricia Hannon (1988) acknowledges that in France seventeenth-century writers based their theories on Descartes's philosophic approach to duality; indeed, as she testifies in these lines, "[w]omen's inferior position in the marriage hierarchy results from their identification with the body as opposed to the mind, which, since Plato and Aristotle, had been equated to men". (17)

Upon these premises, as Alan Dundes (2007: 126) points out, fairy tales, as a folk narrative genre, have transferred the male/female dichotomy into a structural binary relationship whose main tenets are "[…] closely related to principles or elements of world-view".

In contemporary readings and (re)-writings of fairy tales, the theoretical framework on which gender discourses have been analysed and interpreted is mainly based on Judith Butler's conceptualisation of "gendered agency". Indeed, Butler relies on a theory of the discursive formation of the subject or, more precisely, on gender performativity. Her approach on "gendered agency" does not refer to the male/female dichotomy, but rather to the limitations that social framings into the masculine or feminine imply. Furthermore, the "gender discourse revision" brought about by Butler - along with the complex system of contemporary fairy tales' revisions and rewritings- signal the conclusive crisis of the notion of "heteronormativity" according to which society recognises heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of collective organisation.

Significantly, shifts in interpretations of gender have led to the re-formulation of the very structure of fairy tales, which -as demonstrated in the second chapter of this book- is the primary result of on-going changes in their social demands and the values that they express.

Based on these considerations, one of the most famous stories - *Bluebeard*- offers specific material to analyse and explore the changes in gender discourse that fairy tales have brought about with postmodern revisions of the literary genre.

Since examples of re-writings of this enthralling tale have proliferated worldwide, the third chapter takes into consideration two examples of contemporary revision, specifically Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983) and Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980).

Atwood, in the novel "Bluebeard's Egg", voices her critique of gender as a cultural norm and complicates gender binaries starting from the very title of the story: "Bluebeard's Egg", indeed, is a contemporary retelling of the original story, narrated from the perspective of the female protagonist, the wife Sally. The metafictional introduction in Atwood's technique is that the wife is assigned to rewrite the story from a contemporary perspective, which, as it is gradually revealed, contains multi-levelled

shifts -and therefore, multiple interpretations- according to the reader/character relation. The contemporary setting of Sally's revision -which proceeds by means of the "tale within the tale" process- is crucial on the level of the frame narrative, as it will be interpreted, initially, as Sally's oral version of the tale of Bluebeard. Perspectives shift again when the story culminates in a scene in which both Sally and the reader are convinced of her husband's adultery. Precisely from this point onwards, Sally's transformation begins and the audience is asked to readjust its former conclusions on how to interpret Sally's -as well as Ed's- characters. Thus, the plot of "Bluebeard's Egg" is flooded by symbols referring to sexuality and heteronormative stereotypes that Atwood puts under scrutiny and, in particular, she insists on new readings of male sexualities.

Along with Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg", Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* proposes a postmodern reinterpretation of the Bluebeardian *leitmotiv,* which she intertwines with larger patterns, amongst which individuals' fate, love, and most relevantly, gender discourse.

In this novel, the astronomic phenomenon of the transit of Venus becomes the leading thread throughout the highly structured story that covers a three-decade time span, beginning in the early 1950s. In its elliptical-like structure, the novel draws the characters' fate trajectories playing off against a chaotic and disturbed background of Europe that, as Hazzard (1980) acknowledges, was seen as a deathly passage to another dimension: "Going to Europe, someone had written, was about as final as going to heaven. A mystical passage to another life, from which no one returned the same". (37) In this threatening background, Hazzard arranges her characters and blurs gender stereotypes so that she

> […] succeeds at the most basic task of fiction writing – creating real people and allowing the plot to grow credibly out of who these characters are. She is an impressive omniscient narrator who takes turns identifying with one character at a time, going where he goes and seeing what he sees, as well as recording his thoughts. […] As serious readers we must bring a "suspension of disbelief" to the novel, a mindset that makes allowances for dialogue that may seem stilted.[4]

Hazzard's characterisation of the protagonists suggests a meticulous knowledge of human beings, which comes to represent the core of her novel: the interactions of personalities and gender-based relationships push the audience beyond narration boundaries and present them with further interpretations of social interrelations.

[4] Bailey Katherine, http://katherinebaileyonbooks.com/TheTransitOfVenus.aspx.

CHAPTER ONE

SEXUALITY AND MASCULINITY: THE MALE QUEST FOR GENDER IDENTITY

1.1 Gender and sex: An overview

The concept of gender entails perspectives and prerogatives that continue to be central issues in social, philosophical and literary studies, as it represents a multifaceted construct, which influences and wields power over every individual in our society. As contemporary studies have demonstrated, the traditional binary gender paradigm is obsolete, in that it embodies the notion of normative sexualities, in particular for people whose sense of themselves as "gendered individuals" deviates from the gender they were assigned at birth. In this light, David Glover and Cora Kaplan (2009) posit that

> […] *gender* is a much contested concept, as slippery as it is indispensable, but a site of unease rather than of agreement. If *gender* is used to mark the differences between men and women, portmanteau words like *gender-bending* or *gender-blending* call those differences into question, drawing attention to the artificiality of what we think of as 'natural' behaviour. This sense of discord ought to warn us against seizing too quickly upon a summary definition of the term, seeking order and clarity where none is to be had. (2)

Indeed, femininity and masculinity refer to individuals' *gender identity*, that is to say the degree to which every person sees himself/herself as masculine or feminine according to defined social roles. Hence, masculinity and femininity are deeply rooted in one's social role rather than in one's biological sex. Accordingly, Caroline Humphrey (2006: 157-176) posits that "the subject is at least in part constituted as a social being by being named", and Gabriele vom Bruck (2006: 226) adds that "subjects are brought into existence and classified through speech acts as naming".

It therefore goes without saying that every individual might be "re-gendered" to conform to both social and/or personal rules. Since words are the most pervasive strategy to mould people's identities, the representation and perception of gender are similarly shaped and influenced by names. Therefore, the concept of *gender identity* differs from *gender stereotypes,* which can be considered as a set of socio-cultural oriented views of the personality traits and behaviours that characterise one's gender. In this light, Richard D. Ashmore, Frances Del Boca and Arthur Wohlers (1986: 69-119) posit that a person may define herself female, but instead of seeing herself in a stereotypical female manner, such as being expressive, warm, and submissive, she may portray herself in a stereotyped masculine fashion showing practical and dominant features. Hence, as Raewyn Connell (2001) argues,

> [a]ttempts to understand gender have sometimes used the idea of sex roles; and sometimes have treated men and women as simple categories. But the most fruitful approach is to see gender as a system of social relations. Masculinities are the patterns of social practise associated with the position of men in any society's set of gender relations. Bodily difference is not a fixed determinant of gender patterns; it is, rather, a point of reference in gender practises. (1)

With its impressive breadth of coverage, the term *gender* requires a clear-cut examination of both men and women's relational behaviours and social practises. Undoubtedly, gender is specifically relational; indeed, the gender position that society builds up for men and women does not necessarily conform to what they actually are or do. The use of the term *gender* to refer to socio-cultural implications is unknown however, and its application to socio-relational fields is relatively new. What is certain is the fact that the term was already present and applied in sexology by the early 1960s in Alex Comfort's eye-opening work *Sex in Society*, a revised publication of *Sexual Behaviour in Society* (1950), in which the author deals with "gender roles" in a chapter titled "The Biological Background". Here Comfort reflects on the difficulties and idiosyncrasies of human sexuality and the role that instincts play in sexual behaviours, given "the far greater importance of higher mental functions in man" (1963: 34) than in the other animal species. This assumption explains why

> [t]he 'gender role' which an individual adopts -[…]- according to the standards of his culture, is oddly enough almost wholly learned, and little if at all built in; in fact, the gender role learned by the age of two years is for

> most individuals almost irreversible, even if it runs counter to the physical sex of the subject. (42)

Here the term "gender" is used to refer to the multifaceted "styles" of behaviours which characterise different societies, but it also underlines the fact that within these styles the range of choice is actually limited. Other efforts to define the distinction between sex and gender include, by the end of the 1960s, the works of the anthropologist and psychoanalyst Robert J. Stoller. Among his writings, the work *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968) proposes that "gender role" and "gender identity" indicate two different concepts in that the former refers to the individual's outer behaviour whilst the latter to one's inner life:

> *Gender identity* starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not to the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated, so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even as a man who fantasies being a woman. (10)

The distinction between *gender* and *identity* worked out by Stoller has inspired writers and researchers in socio-cultural sciences as in the case of Judith Butler, whose book *Gender Trouble* (1990) still represents a milestone within the field of *gender studies*. In this illuminating work, Butler reflects on the distinction between gender and identity. As she posits,

> gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts.* The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (140)

According to Butler's reflection, therefore, gender mirrors and symbolises recurrent "public actions" that an individual performs in his/her social life. Such a definition implies the possibility of choosing one's gender but, upon a closer analysis, a contradiction arises in that we hardly ever choose our identity, on the contrary, we often battle with it. Indeed, social context influences men and women's behaviours and, in its turn, is influenced by individuals' performative disposition towards the world which surrounds them.

The work by Teresa de Lauretis entitled *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (1987) offers a detailed analysis of contemporary representations of gender and fosters a clear-cut example of how this term has become a challenging conceptualisation. In her words, these representations are "produced by a number of distinct 'technologies of gender' constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which often are in conflict with one another". (X) Seen through her perspective, for de Lauretis, all the contradictions and idiosyncrasies that derive from this "multiplicity" involve the origin of new gender identities, thus creating a wider spectrum of implications. In the same period, Chantal Mouffe (1983) proposed a contrasting theory on gender, which aimed at putting de Lauretis's assumptions on gender identity and representations under scrutiny. Indeed, for her

> 'despite their heterogeneity, discourses and practises do not take place in isolation' but interact with one another to create 'a common effect'. As a result 'the feminine' is invariably set up 'as a subordinated pole to the masculine', a process in which 'the symbolism linked in a given society to the feminine condition plays a fundamental role'. (141)

In past western societies, the "division" between the male and feminine condition proposed by Mouffle was based on individuals' innate differences in features, behaviours and temperaments. Modern studies have underlined instead that femininity and masculinity are not innate but based upon social and cultural codes. Thus, the differences that men and women show are not the result of their biological functions; rather, these features represent the socio-cultural outcome that is "expected" for each sex.

1.2 The birth and evolution of "Male Studies"

To pursue the challenging effort to find a definition to actually sketch out the term *gender*, it is necessary to dislodge the stereotyped differentiation between femininity and masculinity. Sigmund Freud, in his studies on sexuality, argued that the various forms of sexual perversions dismantle the concept of heterosexuality:

> Experience of the cases that are considered abnormal has shown us that in them the sexual instinct and the sexual object can merely be soldered together –a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object

> appears to form part and parcel of the instinct. We are thus warned to loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between instinct and object. (Freud in Richards Angela Eds., 1973, 82, 20)

This statement opens up a new perspective through which the line between what is considered normal and deviant, in the form of perversion, becomes misleading. Indeed, by stressing this assumption, Freud suggests that there can be situations in which ordinarily acceptable sexual activities such as touching or looking could come to be defined as perverted. Therefore, as Enrique R. Torres (1991: 73) puts it, "human sexuality (…) cannot in any sense be enclosed within a specific pattern which may be considered normal (…), all human sexuality is essentially perverse".

In this light, it is essential to trace back the origins of the differentiation between the contemporary terms *femininity* and *masculinity*. The question of "femininity" has troubled researchers for a long time in that, as Kaplan and Glover (2009) argue,

> […] femininity may be defined as a set of attributes ascribed to biologically sexed females, what exactly those attributes are, and the extent to which any given version of femininity is natural or cultural, have been debated long and hard by women themselves. […] In life as well as in fiction, one *can* both 'live' a gendered identity in all its complexity, and hold its received definition at arm's length. In fact, the analysis of femininity by women has a long pedigree in its own right. (26-27)

As feminist theories and politics have developed over time, they have increasingly undergone a process of intertwined changes, among which the correlation with *men studies* and *masculinities* stand out. Intersectionality has therefore led scholars and researchers to widen the field of study by including new issues and perspectives on gender. Hence, the roots on which the differentiation between femininity and masculinity is based plays a fundamental role in understanding these two perspectives.

Feminist movements have played a distinctive role in the development of women's specific study of social institutions such as the family, shedding light on the contribution of sexual divisions in the home and in the workplace, thus investigating the implications between private and public sphere. As a result, women went beyond putting themselves back into a "revised" framework with the aim of reconfiguring the way in which history, in its broadest sense, has been passed down according to patriarchal stereotypes.

Research on women's history flourished in the 1970s and 80s, in particular in the United States and Great Britain. Notwithstanding their

different approaches (the former focussed on family and sexuality, the latter concentrated on labour politics), the two currents had the common purpose of exploring the complex relationship between men and women. In its turn, with the development of new literary, philosophical and social doctrines, amongst which the Postmodern movement, women's movement underwent growing criticisms due to the predominance of white, Western and heterosexual "stereotyped" females in the writing of women's history. On this premise, an unprecedented interest in women's ethnicity, class and sexual orientation influenced the theory and practice of gender and femininity, thus drawing attention to the shifting and blurring ways in which women but, as we will see, also men, develop *gendered identities*. These complexities indicate the dynamic features that the term *gender* entails and lead us to a further point: the aforementioned relationship between femininity and masculinity. Indeed, research into female studies continue to thrive and, as David Bloodwood (1997) maintains, keep pace with male studies:

> Because the feminism that arose in the 1960s and 1970s critiqued so much about men and men's position in society, men felt either pressured or obliged to respond. Men initially responded in two ways. The major form of response took the form of rejection or critique of feminism from within the currently existing patriarchal structures and values. (1)

The first seeds of male studies were sown, as Bloodwood proposes, "in the form of apologizing for men's bad behaviour towards women and for the apparent inadequacies in men's personalities". (1) This ideology took the name of "Apologist approach" and by the end of the 1980's had almost died out. From this experience, a new male perspective emerged under the name of "Men's Liberation". This current was based upon the conviction that men are also suffocated by their male role. In this light, Bloodwood maintains that

> [t]his approach did not address the major power imbalances between men and women, nor, apparently, did it fire men's passions in the way feminism did for women. However, it did have the benefit that it proposed a way out of the inhibiting Apologist guilt through action for men's benefit. (2)

In the early 1980s, the Men's Liberation ideology divided up into three subgroups known as "Pro-feminists", "Mythopoets" and "Protest School". The first subgroup, the Pro-feminists, mainly focussed on power, marginalisation, and gender, and specifically on masculinity. Its main representatives, Michael Kimmel, Harry Brod, Michael Kaufman and

Joseph Pleck drew on feminist concerns and applied them to the analysis of masculinity/ies. More specifically, this current represented the intellectual arm of the Men's Movement and centred its analysis on male hegemony in gender discourse.

The second branch, the Mythopoets, represented the core of the Men's Movement and managed to explain how rituals and myth could reconcile men with each other, and inevitably, with their deep masculine side; indeed, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael Messner (1994) posit that this

> […] recently emergent fragment of the cultural image of the New Man is the man who attends the weekend "gatherings of men" that are at the heart of Robert Bly's mythopoetic men's movement. Bly's curious interpretations of mythology and his highly selective use of history, psychology, and anthropology have been soundly criticized as "bad social science" […]. […] A major preoccupation of the gatherings is the poverty of these men's relationships with their fathers and with other men in workplace. […] Bly's "male initiation" rituals are intended to heal and reconstruct these masculine bonds […]. (202)

Thus, in the effort to find a response to these concerns, Robert Bly "dodges" the central point of the feminist critique based on the theory that men, as a group, are granted a system of power, which relentlessly, oppresses women as a group. Furthermore, Bly manages to find a parallel between women and men's movements, thus assuming a "natural" contraposition of the two groups' respective values:

> He [Bly] assumes a natural dichotomization of "male values" and "female values" and states that feminism has been good for women in allowing them to reassert "the feminine voice" that had been suppressed. But Bly states […] "the masculine voice" has now been muted – men have become "passive…tamed…domesticated". Men thus need a movement to reconnect with the "Zeus energy" that they have lost. "Zeus energy is male authority accepted for the good of community". (*Ibid.,* 203)

The assumption that men must be empowered "as men" entails the concept of *sex oppression*, which was spread by some male activists in the 1970s, according to which women and men were equally oppressed by sexism. This theory was soon refuted by Mark E. Kann who argued that "[m]en tend to pay a price for their power: They are often emotionally limited and commonly suffer poor health and a life expectancy lower than that of

women. But these problems are best viewed not as 'gender oppression', but rather as the 'costs of being on top'". (*Ibid.,* 203)

The third group, which originated from Men's Liberation, was the "Protest School". This current was basically composed by a circle of former pro-feminists who were eager to analyse the excesses of feminist orthodoxy, as in the case of Warren Farrell (1994) and David Thomas (1993). In this light, Bloodwood (1997: 2) argues that they "ask challenging questions about the nature of the supposed male privilege, examine some double binds into which feminism place men, and document areas of 'reverse sexism'". The main tenets of this group were "addressing new feminist-inspired legal inequalities, and ensuring women get the message that men are human with understandable emotional responses to attack". (4)

In opposition to the Apologists, a fourth ideology arose in the late 1970s, the precursor of "Men's Rights". This current influenced the Men's Movement without actively taking part in its actions. Its main tenet was the conviction that all men are good:

> [t]his school starts from the premise that men are basically good people […], and that the criticisms thrown at men by feminists are undeserved and unfair. The special focus of this school is the disenfranchisement of men in family litigation. The problem is 'feminazis' taking over the family agenda in the legal arena. As with the Protest School, it is up to men to stand up and prevent this abuse. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Messner, 4)

In recent years, thanks to the increasing and ever-widening impact of male studies on social issues, a different image of men has been worked out, that of the "New Man". According to Anne Machung (1989) and Ruth Sidel (1990), "[r]esearch has indicated that many young heterosexual men do appear to be more inclined than were their fathers to 'help out' with housework and child care, but most of them still see these tasks as belonging to their wives […]". (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Messner, 205)

This statement puts the void between men's "desire" to collaborate and cooperate with their female partners in parenting and their effective involvement under scrutiny. As Lynne Segal (1990) puts it, in most cases, "the fact that men's apparent attitudinal changes have not translated into widespread behavioural changes may be largely due to the fact that men may fear that increased parental involvement will translate into a loss of their power over women". (255) Again, as this comment demonstrates, the concept of gender is used here to "define" the idea of sex roles and to "represent" masculinity as a set of patterns associated with the position of man in society. In this perspective, contemporary research on gender

studies has led to a more feature-oriented interest in masculinities, whose main outlines include the analysis of concepts such as, presence of multiple masculinities, presence of hierarchies of masculinities, individual/collective masculinity/ties, actively constructed masculinities within social life, and masculinities' changes over time.
From this perspective, Raewyn Connell's eye-opening work entitled *Masculinities* (1995) analyses the history of masculinity and proposes a new approach widely shared by scholars, according to which understanding masculinity entails analysing the male body and its relation to both masculinity and gender. To this point Connell adds:

> Rather than attempt to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, […] a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men […] conduct gendered lives. 'Masculinity' […] can be briefly defined as all that is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practises through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practises in bodily experiences, personality and culture. (71)

In a chapter titled "Men's Bodies", Connell goes further by stating that sociobiology has replaced religion in the effort to justify hegemonic gender ideology. Inevitably, in its turn, sociobiology failed to propose the biological determination of sex differences, which has been confuted on the basis of the influence of socio-cultural diversities in the building up of one's gender. To make this concept clearer, Connell uses the metaphor of the body as a programme-based machine to subvert the deceiving theory, which stresses the primary role of ideology over biological research, and quotes the cases of sex change operations as examples. All these references show that the term *masculinities* implies multifaceted interpretations and perspectives, since its study is as complex as the object it examines. Thus, the two main theoretical approaches on masculinities, as Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (2003: 4-5-9) suggest, can be defined as "materialist" and "poststructuralist". Whilst the former proposes the concept of normative masculinities as the basis of socio-institutional patterns, the latter devotes its research to disentangling the contradictions and the ambiguities that these models enshrine. Accordingly, early forms of critique to male power in society derive from the theory of "patriarchy", divulgated by second-wave feminists in the 1970s. For this current, as suggested by Christopher E. Forth (2011: 2),

> […] a need to dominate women was viewed as being deeply ingrained in maleness itself, with patriarchy identified as the transhistorical expression

> of an essential male compulsion operating through economic, political and social structures. Marxist feminists more fully developed this model by emphasizing how under capitalism men dominated both industrial production and female reproduction.

A more refined approach to men and masculinities arose from the American sex-role theory developed by psychologists since the early 1930s, aiming at teasing out normative male and female behaviours. Such a theory was put under scrutiny in the 1970s as a result of the distinction between "biological sex" and "gender" proposed by feminists and by some representatives of the Men's Liberation Movement. According to these two currents, patriarchy was harmful for both men and women. Psychologist Joseph H. Pleck endorses the hint offered by this approach, thus assuming that the stereotyped male sex role was misleading in that it insisted on males' physical and sexual strength. To enhance this point, Pleck quotes the historical and social changes in American representations of masculinity. Relentlessly, by the early 1950s, a new and multifaceted form of masculinity based on self-control and economic attainment replaced the previous emphasis on male physical power. This alternative perspective suggests that

> [i]nstead of a deceptively stable "male sex role identity", then, Pleck emphasized tension, contradiction, and anxiety in the formation of masculine identity, and charged psychology itself with reinforcing normative ideals that were out of step with modern realities. (Forth, 3)

Accordingly, at the beginning of the 1980s, the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell works out an eye-opening theory aimed, on the one hand, at overcoming the borders imposed by sex role theory to define diversity amongst masculinity, while on the other hand, at maintaining the concept of patriarchy as its core assumption. Taking Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" as a starting point, Connell (2005) suggests that the idea of "hegemonic masculinity" defines "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women". (77) On this assumption, masculinity might become "hegemonic" when cultural ideal and institutional power coincide, and in the same way, it can be undermined if changes occur in the "principles" that justify the male domination of/on women. Thus, hegemonic masculinity implies an ambivalent perspective on such macro-structures as history and society: