

Contents

Chapter 1

Masculinities and Femininities Past and Present	7
1.1. The Question of Gender	7
1.2. What is Masculinity?	11
1.3. What is Femininity?	19

Chapter 2

<i>A Man Called Ove</i> – The Dusk of Life	33
2.1. Ove – Senior Masculinity	33
2.2. Masculinity Overviews	51
2.3. The Shop-Assistant – The Apologetic Modest Male Youth – and Others	62
2.4. The Foreign, non-Caucasian Swindler	66
2.5. The Modern, Well-off, Young Businessman	67
2.6. The “Blond Weed”	68
2.7. Femininity – Ove’s Wife and Other Women	70
2.8. Conclusions	77

Chapter 3

Things My Son Needs to Know about the World –

Fatherhood between Lyricism and Humor	79
3.1. Masculinity as Fatherhood	79
3.2. Masculinity Otherwise	88
3.3. Femininity	95
3.4. Youth	98
3.5. Conclusions	98

Chapter 4

My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises –

Two Ages of Woman: Childhood and Elderliness	100
4.1. Storyline	100
4.2. Elsa – The Child Prodigy	105
4.3. Elsa’s Grandmother – The Eccentric Superhero	109
4.4. Elsa’s Mother, Ulrika – The Control Freak	120
4.5. Other Women: Britt-Marie – the Sour Discipline- Woman; Kind Maud; the Mother of a Child with a Syndrome – the Caregiver; the Woman with a Perfectly Ironed Black Skirt – the Corporatist	122
4.6. Masculinity – Sketchy Types	136
4.7. Mother-Daughter Relationships	144
4.8. Conclusions	150

Chapter 5

Britt-Marie Was Here – Femininity Reformed

5.1. Britt-Marie – Starting Point	153
5.2. The Rednecks of Borg	163
5.3. Lyricism and Associations	167
5.4. Masculinity – The “Kent Style” and Others	180
5.5. Britt-Marie – Later Developments	192
5.6. Other Women	198
5.7. The Ending	202

Afterword	205
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References	215
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Chapter 1

Masculinities and Femininities Past and Present

1.1. The Question of Gender

Having read a fair amount of literature on gender, masculinity/-ties and femininity/-ties, one can be sure to experience bafflement at the end. Another potential reaction is to feel less knowledgeable and illuminated than when one starts out. The notions – no matter how few – that beforehand seemed reliable and clear are bound to be called into question, and clarity fades. A multiplicity of new concepts is sure to be swirling in one's (enriched and potentially reformed?) mind: (doing) gender, given, inherent, constructed, habitus, femininities, hegemonic masculinity, performativity, dichotomy, oppositional femininities, pariah, dualism, transgender, based, girlie, new masculinities, binarism, second wave and third wave feminism, postfeminism, postfemininity, patriarchalism, oppressive gender, domesticity, household, traditional gender, sex, conservative masculinity/femininity, stereotypes, equalitarianism, inequality, culturally dominant, essentialist, gendered violence, superiority, inferiority, rationality, emotionality, monolithic, emasculation, fatherhood/motherhood, laddism, cyborg masculinity, subject positions, hysteria, compliance, Neo-Victorianism, third gender, manhood, housewife, misogyny, *Feminine Mystique*, Angel of the Hearth, normative femininity, heteronormativity, homemaking etc. (!) Some of these will be detailed in the introductory sub-sections below, others have served to provide a theoretical background for this endeavor.

The notions above once seeped in and filtered, my aim is to study masculinities and femininities as they appear represented by the characters in Fredrik Backman's fictional world of the early novels.

Four literary pieces have been chosen to this purpose: *A Man Called Ove*, *Things My Son Needs to Know about the World*, *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises* and *Britt-Marie Was Here*. The body of this study is made up of chapters named with a novel title followed by a description fitting a central theme in the respective book. The respective chapter focuses on, but is not limited to that particular theme in the analysis that ensues. Every such section deals with and tries to cover all the content that the reading makes available, which is why it is important to start out from the corpus under the lens without any *parti pris* or setting fixed expectations regarding the content and the hermeneutic that it may engender. Accidentally (or not), at first glance there is a balanced divide between the two (traditional?) genders, as two of the books deal with masculinity and two with femininity. The order happens to reflect two significant types of masculinity first – the senior loner and the father – succeeding each other in the first two novels examined here, and thus covering the first half of this research, and then two feminine-permeated universes follow, in the other two fictions, constituting the second half of the research. I have not grouped them in such a way, with the masculine first, based on gender or intentionally, it is an outcome of the chronological order in which the books were published in English, and I have taken this chronology into account in my examination of them. Even though, as the titles suggest, adult and even senior representatives of the genders seem to take prominence in Backman's early work, other age categories come to the fore, the resulting portrayals supplying a variety of profiles, in terms of both age and other, more or less relevant criteria, such as background, class, ethnicity etc. The approach is a mixture of cultural, social and identity studies, linguistics and psychology, in combination with interculturality.

The overviews on masculinity and femininity below, placed before the actual analysis of the literary pieces, are meant to offer a

very general picture of what these gender categories have entailed throughout history. They introduce some concepts that criticism of these notions has dealt with and detailed in an attempt to better understand them, on the one hand, as well as keep pace with the social transformations towards inclusiveness and progressive approaches to gender. Since we are dealing with a fairly traditional fictional world from this point of view, the more radically progressive considerations on gender, as well as the language formulae designed to represent them the best way possible do not make the object of this scrutiny, and are therefore left untapped into. My analysis has kept close to the text, which is a principle I have followed in all my writings, because it has always seemed to me the best, most accurate way to observe the actual rendering of a *weltanschauung* through the characters. The way characters act, behave, talk and what they think to themselves illustrates beliefs and values of the real world, and Backman's characters do not derail from this truth, as cultural objects worth studying. The interrogation I am conducting wants to examine to what extent conservative outlooks on gender are preserved in the fictional worlds I am contemplating (and thus, according to the principle I have just referred to, in the real world), as well as what other notions and views related to the topic I am tackling are detectable, and how these blend and coexist in either the same character or in the microsocieties populating these imaginary worlds, as well as, last but not least, how the characters cope with this diversity.

This study seems especially timely to me in an age that has witnessed tremendously varied, radical, unexpected and perhaps extreme forms of understanding and construction of gender. History started from seeing gender as the biological sex, a given, and has evolved through stages in which gender represented a dichotomy and a polarity, through sex role theory, past envisaging it as binary, into stressing its performativity and constructed nature – deeming it an “interactional achievement” (Kotthoff and Baron, 2001: IX) – and the

plurality that such a notion may generate, beyond linguistic adaptations that would reflect this constantly changing and fluid understanding of it. Hence, there is a definite not only “complexity”, but “instability” “of gender as a category” (Thorne, 2001: 14). From women’s part, there has been a parallel struggle for freeing themselves from the gender subordinate position into equality, emancipation, freedom and then revisitation of past choices and available positions and constructs. Contemporaneity has gone beyond the extreme forms of these transformations.

Nowadays, there seems to be a desire to return to past forms, a nostalgia for traditional cores that need, however, to take up very different hats from the ones that existed before. In Backman’s universe, we are trying to ascertain what, how much and in what way these previously valid traits are preserved, if at all, and revisited. This nostalgia may happen as a consequence of a very marked diversity that has raised problems in terms of having reached limits from which one does not know where to advance anymore while still preserving some kind of landmarks of any type. Bafflement and insecurity about anything one knows appear, as a result, in some people’s minds and awareness, which creates discomfort. Another reason is that other kinds of very tangible, material crises, such as the economic one and war, have strained people’s attention and required energy resources elsewhere, and they lose patience, interest and availability with more abstract matters and problems. It is quite possible that crisis and threat close people’s hearts and diminish their willingness for tolerance. This step back taken from far-out progressive thinking may take the guise of a type of reactionary rejection, revolt and even hatred surrounding advanced talk on these matters. One can only hope for the wisdom of not losing the insights and peace or open-minded attitude over these matters that humanity has gained, out of an instinctive mechanism of scapegoating, because of a momentary feeling of being saturated or fed up with such matters in times of global crisis.

1.2. What is Masculinity?

What we will attempt here is to understand masculinity first in an atemporal manner, as an archetype. This means that we are looking at data from the earliest representations of masculinity advancing towards more modern times. We are putting forth the idea that there is such a thing as a common core that is atemporal and which constitutes a landmark from which other outlooks on masculinity have derived and deviated. Hence, we are siding with those scholars and thinkers that still believe that there is an archetype to start with, rather than consider that there is no such *noyau dur* and try to deconstruct masculinity before we can gather the outline of it. It is my contention that we should have knowledge of what it used to mean throughout history and conservatively, before deconstructing it – an attitude which I have nothing against, as the collective unconscious evolves, and proof of that is that the newer generations have lost, left behind or faded the perceptions of various identity categories, including masculinity and various others, which my generation still preserved or were at least aware of, which means that any identity category suffers alterations in time, impacted by and assimilating the concepts put forward in society. Hence, I have picked for this section, from the vast amount of literature available on masculinity, the notions that seem to be most widely accepted, relevant, and which constitute the basis for understanding it. Therefore, we are looking into those “‘values,’ behaviours, and expectations” or “performance” seen as typical for each gender of the traditional two (Cereda and Ross, 2012: VIII).

To begin early, in the fourth and third centuries BC, in Hellenistic Athens (the city that still represented the cultural center of the Hellenistic world), Berg declares, as central to masculinity, citizenship, which was related to visibility and order-making in the public sphere, wealth, so as to provide for a family, and control in “sexuality, temper, talking, and general behaviour”, exercised over oneself, to avoid looking foolish before others and save face, but also over matters and people in general (Berg, 2011: 110).

Christopher Fletcher notices that late medieval masculinity, for which the commonly used term was “manhood”, was seen as centered on a personality relying on “strength, vigour, steadfastness and a certain kind of concern with status and honour, including largesse and conspicuous expenditure”, while sexuality was subdued (Fletcher, 2011: 62). Manliness also resided in avoiding the shame of yielding in a confrontation and of subjection, of being dominated, which is linked with a logic of vengeance (*ibidem*: 64-5). A parallel was drawn between prevailing in physical battle and success in fighting evil and sin – military triumph mirrored and was proof of spirituality; courage was also obviously needed and a virtue (*ibidem*: 67).

In analyzing the construction of early modern and modern manliness between the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, for English gentry, French and Rothery are interested in continuity and argue the existence of a common core of features that render variations and man types over time. They observe the central, ever-present content of traits as residing in “patriarchal dominance” and the virtues of “honour, authority and autonomy”, self-determination remaining an ideal regardless of the forms that it takes in different historical periods (French and Rothery, 2011: 144). Bailey, focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, points out that masculinity was regarded at its center as fatherhood, a notion that initially illustrated male authority, power and mastery (Bailey, 2011: 168). Although variations should be made room for, one could say that, in broad lines, attitudes inside the role of a father changed, from manifesting feeling and sensitivity towards children, in the late eighteenth century, into “taciturnity” and a scarcity of gestures of affection, so as not to seem “feminine”, towards the middle of the next century, and within a mental framework of a dichotomy of independence representing men and dependance being gendered as a woman’s specific; fathers were supposed to manifest their love by being providers instead (*ibidem*: 179).

The dominant ideal of masculinity in the early eighteenth century, called “Augustan”, drawing on Rome under the respective emperor, so synthesizing perspectives throughout history, prescribed as ingredients the following: being driven by reason (an exclusively male characteristic), being outside the influence of emotions, being stoical and uninfluenced by the senses, financial prosperity and autonomy, having public presence and citizenship (Karremann, 2011: 109-110). Shaftesbury’s concept of “politeness” made up a gentleman, together with “civic duty” a bit earlier in the age, starting with the seventeenth century (*ibidem*: 111). Being moral, dutiful, educated and civilized stood on the foundation of self-restraint and reason, and opposed animal instinctual nature and “womanish irrationality” (*ibidem*: 112). Characterized as “a central text of Western civilization” (Volkman, 2011: 131), *Robinson Crusoe* gave, in the eighteenth century, the features of ideal masculinity for this world: “self-reliance, perseverance, clear-cut belief systems”, but also a “materialistic, oppressive, and utilitarian” worldview (*ibidem*: 132), mastery of both the surroundings and oneself, reliance on reason, a desire to subjugate and colonize nature, and a fear of it in its wild form, as Laurenz Volkman points out in his article.

The Victorian age maintained a distinction between attributes of mainstream masculinity, such as “activity, strength, determination, and rationality”, associated with the public sphere, and those of passive, subdued and sensitive femininity, associated with the private sphere (Schneider, 2011: 147). Masculinity was hegemonic, imperialistic, ideologically asserting “superiority over women, the lower classes, and other ethnicities” (*ibidem*: 150). Even though in many Victorian novels these qualities of masculinity seem to be missing, this manner of represented “othered” masculinity “is one way of illustrating, by implication and *ex negativo*, the qualities of what is at the center” (*ibidem*: 153).

Recounting his efforts to theorize and revisit masculinity together with other scholars, Victor Seidler implicitly and explicitly mentions some features that have been preserved in modern times as pertaining to what is typically masculine. As he gathers with his colleagues to confer, he notices in them the tendency to “rationalize and intellectualise” on the topic rather than “share”, which is specific for a culture that has taught men to compete, be tough and victorious and avoid looking vulnerable; he and his colleagues feel trapped in a mental atmosphere of “rationalist masculinity” that “resisted feeling” (Seidler, 2011: 434). Masculinity is seen as having been “dominant” in discourse and reality, silencing other voices, men having the power and “superiority” over women (and other marginals); however, also, there is a need to experiment masculinity, transgress boundaries and relay with the concept of experience itself (*ibidem*: 435). Family is criticized as an institution of appearances that can “undermine children and destroy their sense of self-worth” (*ibidem*: 436). Man has appeared as head of the family, its possessor and dominant voice, as caretaker and breadwinner, while the woman was confined to the private sphere of the house, lacking visibility, the spouses having specific roles. Traditional constructs of genders relied on a Kantian dichotomy between man representing the “rational self”, being reasonable, and standing for culture, and woman being associated with nature, the body, pleasure of the senses and emotionality; a corollary was that man lacked in emotionality and manifested a “fear of intimacy” (*ibidem*: 439). Interestingly, a reconfiguration of masculinity was favored against the background of feminism, which, for some men who questioned conservative views on masculinity, came as an opportunity to do precisely that, or, as Seidler puts it, a “relief”, as men could now “share more emotionally within relationships” (*ibidem*). In terms of bodies, men’s are traditionally strong, “hard”, capable of enduring pain, virile, and women’s are soft, malleable and weak (*ibidem*: 443). Self-mastery, when it came to the body, involved strength but also control over one’s