

Poking into the Manosphere
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A book review posted on October 9th, 2014 in the webzine Taki's Magazine¹ caught my eye. It was written by Ann Sterzinger and entitled "Pardon Me, Gents: Of Quintus Curtius"² The book, which was published as a Kindle the month before, was "*Thirty Seven: Essays on Life, Wisdom, and Masculinity* by the obviously pseudonymous author Quintus Curtius."³ Ms. Sterzinger informs us that it is made up of meditations on ancient thinkers and adapted from Curtius' writings in Return of Kings, a masculinist website. She shares that, writing this review, as a woman she felt "a healthy guilt poking into the manosphere."

My interest was piqued. I knew nothing about the Return of Kings site or masculinist websites in general, and I hadn't done any poking into the manosphere. I had heard of the term manosphere, and knew it referred to Internet discourse on men and masculinity, and I was aware of the feminist caricature of "manospherians" as, Ms. Swearingen's words, "drunks in stupid hats trawling for sluts," but that was about it.

The Sterzinger review reminded me how little, really, I had read about the topic of men in any context. All that came to mind were a couple of books from the '90s: Warren Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power*;⁴ and a book I've used in a sport and society course I teach at the university by an English professor at Amherst College, Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others*.⁵ I decided that it would be worth spending some time looking into what's going on with boys and men.

Right after finishing the Sterzinger review of *Thirty Seven*, I went to the Return of Kings web site.⁶ Its "About" section said:

Return Of Kings is a blog for heterosexual, masculine men. It's meant for a small but vocal collection of men in America today who believe men should be masculine and women should be feminine. ROK aims to usher the return of the masculine man in a world where masculinity is being increasingly punished and shamed in favor of creating an androgynous and politically correct society that allows women to assert superiority and control over men. Sadly, yesterday's

masculinity is today's misogyny. The site intends to be a safe space on the web for those men who don't agree with the direction that Western culture is headed.

It appears none of the authors consider the ROK site a safe enough space to use their real names. All pen names. Such is the status of free speech in America.

There must be a hundred or more articles on the site, each followed by reader comments, clustered within categories, among them, philosophy, history, culture, language, masculinity, lifestyle, and books. I sampled the articles, touching down on some just enough to know they weren't for me, and reading in full, I suppose, fifteen of them. As might be expected, the articles varied greatly in quality, and I could see the basis for the "drunks with stupid hats" stereotype ("to tell a woman not to be manipulative, self-serving, or finicky is to tell a hawk not to devour a mouse" "women are inherently terrible people"). The talk of "gaming" young woman came off, at least initially, as undignified and sleazy, but after a while, with many of these kinds of pronouncements anyway, I got the irony and intentional exaggeration being employed to make a point. While I don't applaud everything I read on ROK, there was enough straight-ahead, thoughtful and thought-provoking writing to bring me back to the site several days running. In particular, I found some of the personal-development articles helpful to me personally (e.g., "Life Advice That All Men Should Know" "How to Avoid the 3 Worst Qualities of the Beta Male").

There were frequent references in the ROK articles to "the red pill" and "the blue pill"—someone swallowing the red pill, did he take the red pill or blue pill, and such. I knew nothing about red and blue pills going into the reading. I picked up from the contexts in which they were used that they are metaphors that have to do with men getting wise to the ways of women, but beyond that I wasn't sure, so I did some Googling to get clearer.

It turns out the red pill and blue pill are popular culture symbols representing the choice between embracing the sometimes painful, at least in the short run, truth of reality (the red pill) and the blissful, but too often costly, ignorance of illusion (the blue pill). They are derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves), is given the choice of a red or blue pill. I've tried screening the film the last couple of days,

I'd never seen it, but couldn't make it past ten minutes, it's just not my taste in film; so I'll have to take Google's word on the matter.

The red and blue pill metaphors could apply to anything—personal circumstance, social/cultural realities, you name it—living in reality rather than illusion, but the reference here of course is gender relations, and particularly the idea that men buying into the false notion that females are the oppressed sex, and being duped by women's machinations, is swallowing the blue pill, and that that leads to beta maleness, which for sure has its payoffs but deep down gnaws on you and drives you to drink (or, as the ROK articles point out, pornography, chicken wings, and picking your toenails). The challenge for men, so it goes, is to take the red pill and wake up to the reality of women. The most prominent manifestation of the red pill concept is an Internet site on Reddit (“The Red Pill: discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men.”)⁷

One of the problems I've had with the feminist movement is its tendency to set women off against men—to promote women seeing men as the other, the enemy--and I'm concerned that the masculinist movement will do something comparable, and there was enough on ROK to feed that worry. But the more time I spent with the site, the more the worry lessened—not completely, but to a great extent.

An example of lessened worry was around MGTOW, an acronym that came up several times in in the articles. I learned that it stands for Men Going Their Own Way, and at first I thought it referred to men rejecting women altogether, simply writing them off as ogres all, and in an embittered huff having nothing to do with them whatsoever. But as I read along, I realized that my initial impression missed a more nuanced point, that the MGTOW thrust operates on two levels concurrently: it is both a flat out condemnation and rejection of woman, they are irredeemable, and an affirmation of male autonomy that could (informed by the red pill) lead to healthy and mutually satisfying relationships with women.⁸ As one ROK writer put it:

Men Going Their Own Way is a statement of self-ownership, where the modern man preserves and protects his own sovereignty above all else. It is the manifestation of one word: “No.” Ejecting silly preconceptions and cultural definitions of

what a “man” is. Looking to no one else for social cues. Refusing to bow, serve and kneel for the opportunity to be treated like a disposable utility. And living according to his own best interests in a world which would rather he didn't.

Men Going Their Own Way can, and I presume often does, serve as an empowering thought experiment. The way it works, I ponder the reality that really, no kidding, I don't absolutely have to work anything out with a woman singular, or women plural. I don't absolutely have to win women over, relate to them, look good to them, charm them, be OK with them, please them, serve them, or support them individually or collectively; not a bit, zero, nada, zilch, nil. Where'd I get the idea I did? I don't. I own my life, women don't. I'm free—really, no kidding. But being free to have nothing to do with woman also means I am free to have something to do with women, and on terms that are good for me; my connection with women isn't going to be a matter of me pulling their ox carts through life. Let me figure out what my terms are for being in a close relationship, including marriage, with a woman. I'll write them down and then decide how much effort I'm willing to put into making them a reality. My bet is that what I work out will be better for the women in my life as well as for me, because no matter what they say they want, have been conditioned to believe they want, deep down women don't want a beast of burden (or a pillow to punch, or a living ATM, or a glass-of-white-wine, small-talk partner). They want a real man, an alpha man—calm, confident, proud, honorable, protective, self-respecting, and on his true path in life; they want to share a man's adventure with him, support him in his quest. That's what I'll be like and what I'll be doing or I'm gone.

There is a qualifier to that “or I'm gone” pronouncement, however:

A man should lead a life that increases the quality of life and happiness of as many people as possible, but he can, and should, only be responsible for his own happiness. There is one exception to this rule. Offspring. Until their adulthood, a man as a father is responsible for the wellbeing and happiness of his children.

Don't, for any reason, abandon those kids.

In addition to that qualifier, add a caution. ROK was replete

with admonitions to men to be aware of the trauma around divorce and to protect themselves financially (prenuptial agreements and so on) in case of a divorce. After reading this material, I re-read the actor Alec Baldwin's enlightening and sobering account of his divorce from the actress Kim Basinger, *A Promise to Ourselves: A Journey Through Fatherhood and Divorce*.⁹ Baldwin's book should be required reading for any man contemplating marriage.

As I perused the articles in *Return of Kings*, there were a number of references to a book published in Germany back in 1972, *The Manipulated Man*, written, ironically enough, by a woman, Esther Vilar (still alive at 79).¹⁰ Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminist Mystique*¹¹ is seen by many as the seminal book in modern feminism, and evidently the Vilar book is its masculinist counterpart. Vilar writes:

If a young man gets married, and starts a family and spends the rest of his life working at a soul-destroying job, he is held up as an example of virtue and responsibility. The other type of man, living only for himself, working only for himself, doing first one thing and then another simply because he enjoys it and because he has to keep only himself, sleeping where and when he wants, and facing woman when he meets her on equal terms and not as one of a million slaves, is rejected by society. The free, unshackled man has no place in its midst.

Vilar asserts that women have a level of control of men that most men are not aware of, or most likely do not want to admit. I notice that my university library has it, and that Amazon sells it as a Kindle for \$4.99, so I'll take a look at it at some point.

The Ann Steringer review led me to conclude that *Thirty Seven* by this Quintus Curtius, whoever he really is, is my next step. Ms. Steringer seemed to have respect for the book. She noted that while she has some trouble getting around the fact that *Thirty Seven* in the title doesn't have a hyphen (me too), "[i]t would be a shame for anyone with an interest in medievalism, the classics, or history in general to skip this volume's varied banquet of delicacies." And later she notes, "This book is rare among modern publications in that it is explicitly written for men who wish to cultivate the masculine virtues in utter disregard for the advice of their modern sisters [I assume she means feminists], looking instead to the long

experience of the dead.”

I could relate to that. I had just come from a faculty meeting in the college of education where I am a professor, and of the eighty or so faculty and administrators in attendance, by my count upwards of seventy of them were women (I can remember when it was 50/50 men and women, but retirements and hirings over the last twenty years have changed that), and as far as I can tell, every last one of them is a modern sister. The few men present—none of whom were in front of the room conducting the meeting, and collectively they/we said virtually nothing—are, my take on it, active members in the modern sisters auxiliary. And it didn't strike me that if these men hadn't been in their university jobs that they'd be Navy SEALs, if you know what I mean. (I'm not excluding myself from these generalizations. I've spent my life embedded among feminist women and their male sedan chair bearers, and to presume that I have escaped being shaped by that experience would be kidding myself. If alpha and beta are on a continuum, you can locate me well past the midline on the beta side.)

Sterzinger in her review notes that the Curtius essays are concerned with the past and philosophy, Cicero and stoicism and the French philosopher Denis Diderot and so on, and that rang a melodious bell with me; I could do with some historical and philosophical explorations. My work world, professional education, is very much tied into the present (the one exception: the spirit of educational theorist and Stalin fan John Dewey (1859-1952) is always in the room), and is strongly referenced in psychology, sociology, and political ideology.

Modern feminism is not so much talked about in my context as it is an accepted Truth, the Gospel, case closed, let's get on with it. Beyond feminism per se, the setting has a feminine, feminized, ethos. To illustrate, not that she's mentioned explicitly any more, in years past she was, the ideas of Nell Noddings, who is now a professor emeritus at Stanford, first articulated in her book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*,¹² pervade the walk and talk of the college. That is to say, there's a strong press toward compassion, caring for others, nurturance, inclusion, fitting into the group, altruism, and peaceful and comfortable human relationships, and security and safety—what might be called the soft virtues, in contrast to hard virtues such as personal autonomy, self-reliance, honor, standing out from the crowd, courage, toughness,

rigor, exactness, persistence, exemplary accomplishment, and adventure and risk.

There is much talk about transforming society in the direction we all know it needs to go. We share a mission, every last one of us (don't we? yes, we do): social justice, diversity, ending racial, ethnic, gender, and economic inequities and oppression. And we know who's doing the oppressing, those white men and their misguided and malevolent ways over there (over there, not the men in the room—or, well, maybe one), and cleaning up the environment and achieving sustainability while we are at it. We are all in agreement on that, aren't we? Yes, we are. Today's meeting, today's mass email, is not going to be about groundbreaking or iconoclastic scholarship--we already know the truth; our job is to find ways to implement it. Academic freedom and integrity are not going to be punched up--they just prop up troublemakers, and we don't like troublemakers.

You have problems with this? Are you sure you want to be here?

So different than it was when I first started working in a university—gasp—forty-five years ago.

At this faculty meeting I referred to a bit ago, my department chair—a woman; every person I report to, from the dean on down, is a woman—introduced a newly hired, tenure-track professor, a man in his early thirties (I was surprised to see that a man got the job) and not of European heritage (predicable). Knowing he was a candidate for a professorship in my department, I looked up a posting of his in the Commission for Social Justice Educators Blog where he argues for the contribution to a university setting he can make: “If not me,” he wrote, “then who will counsel a recent immigrant about race and racism that was experienced at the supermarket or for that matter with an advisor or faculty member on campus? If not me, then who will work with a White student to encourage the process of self-exploration of her/his identity, privilege, oppression and racism and the ensuing guilt that employs a non-judgmental model for that White student's ignorance and lack of exposure to diverse issues?”¹³

I've never met this young man, for all I know he possesses top-rank intellectual capability and drive (if not facility with syntax) and will serve students and the profession and the college and university superbly over the next thirty years as professor. I'm but

speculating that he is not likely to ground his courses or scholarship in European thinkers of the past other than Karl Marx and the twentieth century intellectuals who carry on from him (I'm thinking of the so-called Frankfurt School of intellectuals, among them, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse).¹⁴ European intellectual, and cultural, heritage, traditions, including their slave owning American offshoots—Jefferson, Madison, et al.--will be disparaged as part of an the negative European and American narrative he presents to students, that's my guess.

All to say, it looks to me that my college didn't hire anybody of the ilk of Quinton Curtius. In fact, people who think like whoever this Quinton Curtius is don't even dare to show their faces in public (and drawing on my experience signing off on my beliefs the last decade and a half, I don't blame them in the least). If they do apply for university jobs it has to be under deep cover—the idea of a university as a marketplace of ideas is an anachronism.

So I went to Amazon and purchased the Kindle (the only version available; I assume no regular publisher was interested in this book) of *Thirty Seven* [no hyphen]: *Essays On Life, Wisdom, And Masculinity* by Quinton Curtius. It turned out to be worth my time, I'm recommending it. If I had to guess, I'd say Mr. Curtius is an attorney who lives in Middle America. The Amazon site for the book says it is 186 pages long, but since the Kindle isn't paginated, I can't be exact here documenting references and quotes.

Early on in the book, Curtius sets out his basic frame of reference: he's concerned about the lack of freedom of contemporary men, and he thinks that women are robbing of it:

If freedom really is the ability to live as we want, then is not he who carries out his own free will and judgment in virtuous ways the most "free" of all? If a man's behavior is only guided by fear of breaking the law, by fear of ill consequences, by anxiety over this and that issue, can he be said to be truly free? He who follows his lodestar for the sake of his own virtue acts out of neither fear nor inner turmoil. His disposition liberates him. He is thus truly free. Wicked men, by contrast, are slaves to their own broken and abject wills. He is also a slave who is ruled by his woman: Is a man free whose woman gives orders, who imposes the laws, and prescribes and orders things as she wishes, who can deny

nothing she has commanded of him? If she asks, he has to give. If she calls, he must come running. If she threatens, he must live in fear. I think that such a man is not only a slave but the worst kind of slave.

Curtius spends a good portion of his book talking about the education of a man--which includes but goes beyond formal schooling. As I read along, it struck me how little play this topic gets in the professional literature; or the mainstream, or popular, literature, for that matter. There is much about how girls and women are doing, but little or nothing about how boys and men are doing.

To illustrate, he cites the writings of Italian educational theorist Pier Paolo Vergerio (1369-1444). In praise of these practices, Vergerio pointed out that the Greeks emphasized boys' study of literature, poetics, mathematics, science, and languages, along with music and drawing. Vergerio's advice to the young: don't just dip into any authors; surround yourself with the very best. He stressed training the body as well as the mind. Master martial arts and self-defense, he argued; learn to swim, it builds self-confidence. Personal grooming is critically important, he noted. Live by the credo that every period of life has the capacity to yield something splendid. Strict self-discipline is critical. Expect to be unfairly judged and learn how not to be controlled by it. (Time and again in the ROK site, there was emphasis on learning to deal with criticism so that it doesn't bring you down or deflect you from your course, because feminists, and the left in general, are trigger-finger with degrading criticism and highly skilled at dispensing it.) As far as I'm concerned, Vergerio offered timelessly valuable advice (to both boys and girls), but try to find it in today's educational dialogue.

Curtius offers:

In my own view, the following conditions must exist as a precondition to the flowering of the masculine ethic: (1) institutional support from some sector of society, such as the military, an organized religion, or mercantile or business guilds; (2) the existence of fraternal societies, where men can congregate and associate separately from women, without fear of running afoul of politically correct restrictions and constraints; and (3) mentors willing to instruct young men.

Unfortunately, none of the conditions for the cultivation of masculine virtue are present in modern America. Institutions that once nurtured it have been marginalized or destroyed.

Those preconditions are markedly absent in the boys' lives in this time, unless you count Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as a fraternal society and Kanye West as a mentor.

Curtius notes that Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*,¹⁵ a compendium of biographies of Greek and Roman statesmen, explores what makes great men great, and asserts that we alive now would do well to learn from the wisdom Plutarch uncovered, because

never before have so many been so lost, and so in need of guidance. The quest to enrich, ennoble, and improve ourselves has become, to use the words of H.G. Wells, "a race between education and catastrophe." . . .

By invoking the past, I have tried to remind readers of the glories of leadership, character, and masculine virtue that can change our lives. By bringing up the past, a time before masculine virtues were shamed and punished, readers will be reminded of the glories that will be theirs if they follow the right paths. "The mind is not a vessel to be filled," says Plutarch, "but a fire to be kindled." . . .

Sadly, there are forces [Curtius is referring to feminists and what he calls the "media elite"] that do not want to see us improve: these forces seek to emasculate us, to turn us into compliant hewers of wood and drawers of water for ideologically driven overlords. One can even imagine a future where classical knowledge will be driven underground, purged from schools, or bowdlerized, as not being in tune with modern feminism and political correctness. The degradation of humanistic learning has come as a direct result of the feminization of American society. We cannot permit this to happen. The commissars of modern culture don't want you to know too much about history, or about how things were like in previous eras. This would invite uncomfortable questions, and comparisons with the sorry state of masculinity today.

\$9.49 on Kindle, I think the *Thirty Seven* is worth going through to see what you can find that's useful to you.

I also suggest you take a look at the Kim Townsend book I

mentioned earlier, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others*. Academic prose, not the easiest read, but I found it very helpful. It was fascinating and informative for me to compare what went on in Harvard around 1890 with what goes on in universities in our time; the contrast helped me put today's thoughts and actions in perspective. Back in those years, heavy hitters—among them, Charles Eliot, Harvard's president, and faculty members William James, and George Santayana—took the university's role in making a man deadly seriously; it was right at the top of their agenda of concerns. The ideal man in their eyes was healthy, lean, lithe, alert, graceful, and action-oriented. He possessed a powerful and fierce physicality and presence. He was an effective leader when it was called for and a dutiful follower when it was called for. Those qualities, along with an equally developed understanding of the best that his forebears had created, reasoning capability, personal virtue (decency responsibility, courage), commitment, and willfulness, served him in propelling his race forward (and they did use the word race in those years). People now concerned about the demise of the West and attributing it to, say, increasing individualism and moral relativism, while certainly not discarding their insights, would do well to take into account that some of the very best minds in the past linked the fate of our race to the quality of our men.

Those Harvard men back then wrote and spoke about the development of a gentleman. A gentleman in their minds is dignified, polite, respectful to woman, he honors them, he protects them, and he looks out for his children, and he's a good husband and father—he doesn't run around on anybody, and he doesn't run out on anybody. He doesn't entertain you with his wiggles in the end zone or dazzle you with his haircut and slick pick-up moves at a bar, but if he says he'll be home at six, count on it.

Reading the Townsend book surfaced the question for me, when was the last time I heard the word "gentleman"? For that matter, how often do I hear the word "man" these years? My father was a man; I'm a male, or better, a white male—a dehumanizing, objectifying, and pejorative label, come to think about it. A good pre-condition for hurting someone, breaking him to the saddle (or the cart), taking what he's got, or taking his place, whatever you are up to, is to define him as akin to a animal rather than a human being; as a thing, a type, a category, rather than a unique person; and as, by definition, bad. At Harvard way back when, they talked

about what makes for a man, a gentle man, a gentleman, and it might be good for those of us alive now to also think in those terms, including about ourselves. Because it just may be that a true gentleman will be tougher to do in if that's somebody's bent, and more likely to break away from Sunday night football on NBC and start looking out for his own.

Notes

1. <http://takimag.com>
2. http://takimag.com/article/pardon_me_gents_of_quintus_curtius_ann_sterzinger#axzz3GVtOoXXz
3. Quintus Curtius, *Thirty Seven: Essays on Life, Wisdom, and Masculinity* (Amazon Digital Services, 2014).
4. Warren Farrell, *The Myth of Male Power* (Amazon Digital Services, 2014).
5. Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (Norton, 1996).
6. <http://www.returnofkings.com>
7. <http://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/>
8. There is a Men Going Their Own Way web site <http://www.mgtow.com>. Some of the writing on the site is indeed strident. I leave it to the reader do decide how to interpret its intent and effect: "Quite obviously all women have become insane. It's not that they eschew logic (actually, they are quite good at coming up with rationalizations). It's that they spend the lion's share of their efforts seeking out insane situations, engaging in insane behaviors and basically destroying themselves and anyone stupid enough to allow them the tiniest bit of say in their lives. The solution is equally obvious: don't give them even the tiniest bit of say in your life. When I say tiniest, I mean it. No matter what they ask for, no matter how innocuous, you must say no to it. You must never ask them for anything, even the simplest, smallest thing. If you want something from them you must tell them to give it to you. Although you say it nicely, it must be a command. The very second they say no to you, you need to dump them. It's sad to say, but that's what it takes just to prevent a woman from ruining your life, which she will do 100% of the time if you don't do this."
9. St. Martin's Press, 2010.
10. Esther Vilar, *The Manipulated Man* (Abelard-Schulman, 1972).
11. Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique* (Norton, 1963).
12. University of California Press, 1984.
13. I reported this in a blog to the webzine The Occidental Observer entitled "The Present—and Future State of Higher Education in America." The blog consisted of public pronouncements of the three finalists for a

professorship, none of whom was a European heritage man.

14. For a consideration of the Frankfurt School, see Kevin Macdonald, *The Culture of Critique* (Amazon Digital Services, 2013).

15. *Plutarch: Ultimate Collection* (Amazon Digital Services, 2013).