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## **Book Review: Boyhoods: Rethinking Masculinities**

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## GENDER AND SEXUALITY

BOYHOODS: RETHINKING MASCULINITIES. By *Ken Corbett*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 286 pp., \$26.00.

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Ken Corbett has been working at the cutting edge of feminism, queer studies, and gender theory for twenty years. In *Boyhoods: Rethinking Masculinity*, he brilliantly incorporates these perspectives into his clinical work with children and their parents. Corbett's plan is to reopen central premises regarding masculine development, hoping to lay the groundwork for a psychoanalytic theory that is closer to a boy's experience and reflective of the lives lived by boys (and men) in today's societies. The book transcends its mission, conveying the life and vitality of boyhood so lyrically that it will appeal to anyone aching to remember and to everyone who works with children.

Part I of the book, Boys, Masculinity, and the Family, reworks two papers first published in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. Each shows a boy's masculinity unfolding in relation to his particular set of parents and the society in which they live. In "Little Hans: Masculinity Foretold," Corbett shows how Freud "parses and whittles" Hans's material, directing the father/analyst's interpretations to arrive at the normative oedipal narrative. Corbett's premise is that Freud "foretold" masculinity through this case, capturing certain aspects of a little boy's experience while excluding others—creating the "Ur-boy of psychoanalysis." From Little Hans forward we know "a boy to be a boy through his phallic preoccupations and castration fears, enacted alongside and through his desire for his mother and his rivalry with his father, which in time resolve via the boy's separation from his mother and his identification with his father" (p. 19). Corbett finds an intriguing gap between Freud's emphasis on rivalry and aggression and the affective resonances of dependence and desire that emanate from the pages of the case history. "A theory of masculinity that is forged solely through competition with paternal authority, with little regard for the interplay of identifications, desire, and mutual recognition . . . is largely a theory of phallic narcissism-qua-masculinity" (p. 49).

“Nontraditional Family Reverie: Masculinity Unfolds” recounts the treatment of a boy being raised by his two lesbian mothers—the Ur-boy, if you will, for today’s children growing up in nontraditional families. Add to this, Corbett says, the ways many families employ reproductive technologies, and the child’s age-old question “Where did I come from?” grows ever more difficult to answer. Corbett points to four constructs that require rethinking: (1) the “normative logic” imposed by prevailing social structures, (2) the family romance, (3) the primal scene, and (4) the reproduction of gender through heterosexual complementarity. Corbett addresses all of this in an engaging account of his work with seven-year-old Andy. Andy lives in today’s world of savvy children. Challenged on the playground with the impossibility of being born of two mothers, he replies, “Stupid, haven’t you heard of donors?” Another little girl observes that their mutual friend Lilly “came from a dish.” Corbett helps Andy’s mothers share anxiously guarded thoughts and feelings about their donor. He creates a frame for play and reflection that allows Andy slowly to work out his anxieties surrounding the circumstances of his birth and his family life, the made-up father in his mind, his longings for his analyst to be that man, and his thoughts and feelings about sexuality. Andy’s development leaves no question that a boy can be a boy growing up with two mothers.

Part II, *Boys, Masculinity, and Gender’s Divide*, speaks out in defense of gender variance in young children, drawing on concepts from gender theory that many analysts now readily use in work with adults (see my book essay “Masculinities” in this issue) but still hesitate to apply to the developing child. In “Boyhood Femininity: Masculine Presuppositions and the Anxiety of Regulation” (first published in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*), Corbett severely critiques the literature on Gender Identity Disorder (GID). He questions the conclusions of Susan Coates and her colleagues, who see trauma transferred from mother to son as the catalyst of boyhood femininity and describe the terrible suffering of boys whose minds are so ensnared. Corbett thinks that how a feminine boy challenges the social order is too easily mistaken for pain, and that it is usually the social order, not the mother, who stifles his autonomy. Corbett believes that an affirming parental holding environment best equips feminine boys to go out into the world, contend with the reactions of peers, and make their own adaptations from a more secure base. The goals of adjustment that shape the traditional therapeutic techniques employed with feminine boys—for example, the coercive removal of toys and activities associated with femininity, coupled with coaching the boy in normative masculine play—run counter to this end.

In “Trans States: Feminine Boys and the Therapeutic Scene of Address,” we meet parents who are trying to raise their feminine sons in a social world that seems to have no room for them, and even to hate them. Corbett points out that we have very little in our archives to help us predict how early boyhood femininity will be embodied and lived as these boys transition into adolescence and adulthood. For some a mere trace of femininity may remain; for some the early femininity may be the harbinger of adult homosexuality; for some the femininity may develop toward “a transgendered subjectivity expressed through a range of identities, fantasies, and bodies imagined and made” (p. 124). Corbett’s therapeutic space makes room for future lives that may not fit traditional norms. He helps his patients build the capacity to reflect on their complex inner worlds, reasoning that the minority person may not be able to escape being hated, but if he can reflect on that force and redress it with good enough well-being, he will fare better in his life (p. 122).

Corbett describes consultations with two parents of feminine boys, one a father, the other a mother. In each case, the brief analytically informed consultation is of therapeutic value to the parent, but Corbett doesn’t view the personal issues of either parent as “causal” or “traumatic.” Play sessions with a boy brought for consultation and later supervisory sessions with his therapist speak to our anxieties about giving free reign to a boy’s expression of his femininity in play and action. Lincoln’s initial wariness of Corbett is understood as a reaction to the situation in which he constantly finds himself—his desires and identity are always being taken away from him, but remain within him nonetheless.

The book opens with an evocative description of boys at play in the park beneath Corbett’s window; the sounds of their ball games often provided background to his writing. In Part III, Boys, Masculinity, and Phallic Narcissism, the reader is transported back to that playground. The last two chapters address “the movement, the aggression, the competition, the rivalries, the friendships, and the muscular eroticism that inform boys’ lives” (p. 2). “Faggot = Loser: Phallic Narcissism as a Defense” appeared originally in *Studies in Sex and Gender*. Faggot, Corbett observes, has become the all-purpose putdown, configured on the dynamics of winning or losing in relations with other men or boys. Corbett posits the wish and effort to be a big winner, not a small loser, as a central boyhood theme. In a moment of competition, threatened with losing, six-year-old Josh mutters “Faggot!” setting his analyst reeling internally. Josh’s scripts required a loser, the role assigned to his analyst, with Josh on guard lest the experience

of being little and a loser sneak through his defenses. Corbett argues for the active clinical engagement of this aggression, including the anxiety and splitting that shadow it, and the muscularity of it. He progressively engages his young patients in the “difficult process of thirdness,” which involves stepping back and looking from one’s vantage point at two other points or reflecting on one’s mind, as opposed to simply acting on one’s feelings and impulses. Gradually Josh becomes able to speak more directly about his quest for phallic agency within the dynamics of his family, and finally about libidinal and relational needs.

Freud considered the masculine protest against passive desires toward another man to be “bedrock.” But from this theoretical perspective, Corbett argues, the dependency and love between boys is overlooked, and men become encased in bedrock, fossilized as lacking the empathy, capacity for surrender, and nurturance needed to relate to others outside a dynamic of domination. Men hurl the word *faggot* to project offensive wishes into another. The marked other is then hated. The sort of splitting and rigid regulation that characterized little Josh’s play early in his treatment can, if left unaddressed, “fuel homophobic and misogynist trends that often haunt the lives of men, serving to undo their attachments and leaving them all too often alone and psychically bereft” (p. 206).

Corbett’s last chapter, “Fantastic Phallicism: Recognition, Relation, and Phallic Narcissism,” is a tour de force. Here we see, in wonderful vignettes, how Corbett engages the child’s full imagination and his own in exuberant, mutually created play. Narcissism and mutual recognition coexist in this fantastic space. The physicality, the muscular eroticism, the rough, the tumble, pull the reader close to a boy’s experience of his body and his relations with others. Corbett notes that in the current discourse on boys, whether in the popular parent-help literature or the psychoanalytic domain, the shouts of boys are not heard. He wonders whether a kind of phallophobia crept into our theorizing, without the potential space to imagine “the hope and dread of the erection, phallic endurance, and the theater of ejaculation . . . states that might include the blind pride of aggression and possession, but also the empathy and recognition of surrender” (pp. 219–220). Vignettes from work with an eight-year-old boy and a twenty-seven-year-old man show moments of “muscular and fantastic phallic exchange” colored by both desire and destruction, and how the pleasure and anxiety of these moments became interpretable. Corbett writes: “The challenge for the adult is to stay in the game, to not reflexively recoil from the aggression and competition . . . and at the same time offer a bounded and safe holding environment. This challenge becomes even

greater as competitive games often involve physical contact. Here I believe we return to an aspect of child therapy that is rarely discussed—the subtle ways in which a child therapist is often in the position of having to negotiate the muscular eroticism of children . . . the erotic and materializing realm of touch between men and men and between men and boys is largely absent from our psychoanalytic literature.” Modern understandings of femininity have imagined the “vitalizing necessity of the maternal body and the erotic magnificence of the maternal embrace,” while the paternal embrace as a site of sustaining growth is virtually absent from our literature (pp. 230–232). Corbett goes on to explore male sexual feeling in words and imagery that can’t be summarized—you just have to read the book.

Corbett is a masterful psychoanalyst with a gift for conveying clinical process. His stories help us take a hard look at our assumptions about how boys develop into men. Is the boy’s repudiation of femininity instinctive, as Freud (1937) thought, is it necessary, as Greenson (1968) thought, or is it instilled by society? Is it all of these? It is widely recognized today that the experience of the gendered self is multivariate, and that it changes through the life cycle for both sexes. Corbett argues that the struggles of boys who lay claim to cross-gender experiences illustrate the natural variance in human gender expression, before it is suppressed. A theory predicated on a strict binary system of gender behavior regulation is stifling, constrictive, and contrary to the facts. Adults bound by “the strong arm of regulatory anxiety” deny boys the full expression of their dependent and nurturing desires, and their feminine interests. At the same time, Corbett urges us not to recoil reflexively from male aggression, not to “leave life at the infantile mother-child border” (p. 233). The drive to be big and to win is huge for boys. While integrating the feminine, Corbett celebrates the centrality of the phallus, embracing the aggressive excess of sexual life in its entirety.

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