



To Be a Man: A Guide to True Masculine Power

Written by Robert Augustus Masters

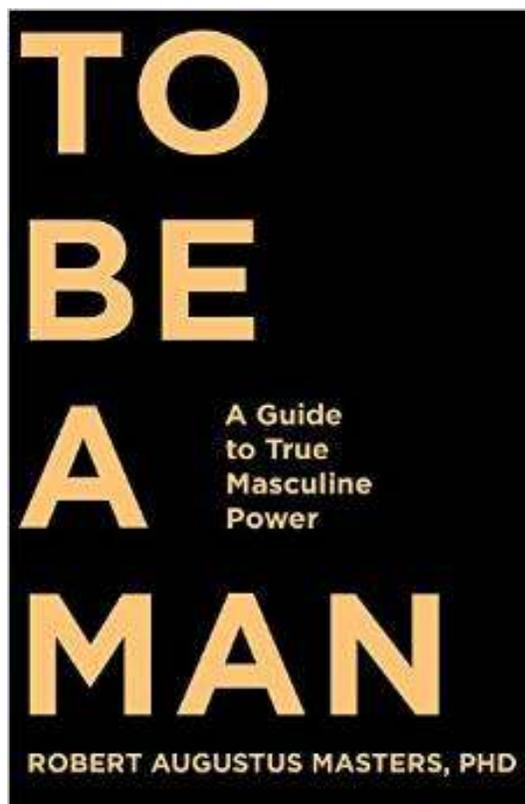
Reviewed by Kimberly Wang

New York University
Gallatin School of Individualized Study

The discourse surrounding gender and sexuality politics has a long and controversial history – the thesis of essentialism (that identity and its qualifiers are fundamental, indisputable facts of nature) has most notably been challenged by the likes of philosophers Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. Robert Augustus Masters joins the conversation in a contemporary attempt to alleviate the self-consciousness of gender normativity. *To Be a Man* is a fascinating dissection and reexamination of traditionally inflexible notions of masculinity. Written in a relaxed and friendly tone, this book offers a wealth of information and guidance in a highly accessible, easily digestible form. Masters integrates discussions of the social and developmental factors underlying gender identity and sexuality with demonstrative exercises, examples from his personal life, and pop culture references—it is precisely this dynamic interplay of theory, practice, play, and appeal to spirituality that is so powerful.

Divided into five parts, each of which explores a different aspect of the journey towards “authentic manhood,” *To Be a Man’s* greatest strengths lie in its attempts to address the issues of relationship dissatisfaction, intimacy, effective communication, sex, self-esteem, shame, and violence (toward self and others) through the investigation of where men’s destructive self-attitudes come from. In its discussion of these particular issues, Masters focuses on the necessity of compassion and empathy to achieve a true depth in relational intimacy, vulnerability as a strength and not a weakness (“softening does not necessarily mean emasculation” (pg. xv), and the need to recognize and challenge the

tendency to eroticize one’s wounds (particularly in regards to having an escapist attitude towards sex and to using pornography as an emotional crutch). Another notable strength is Masters’ helpful distinctions between commonly confused concepts that present as further obstacles to the healthy expressions of masculinity – anger versus aggression, conscience versus internal criticism, healthy versus unhealthy shame, etc. Supportive exercises are scattered throughout to reinforce the theories discussed (i.e. “Anger-In, Anger-Out, Mindfully Held Anger, and Heart-Anger,” a visualization practice on page 92).



Of particular interest is Masters' commentary on how the unquestioning internalization of rigid "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" contributes to the anxiety of obeying prescribed parameters and the excessive self-criticism that results when one fails to adequately conform. In this regard, Masters identifies the issue of overcompensation – either by becoming even more "ruthlessly driven, more competitive, more uncaring about their unresolved wounds" (xiv) or "rebellious" by "driving their hardness and competitiveness into the shadows, and making too much of a virtue out of their softness and more 'feminine' qualities." According to Masters, both are equally damaging in that "in either case, they are reacting to whatever notion of manhood has been or is being authoritatively held aloft before them, defining themselves through – and impaling themselves upon – such reactivity" (xiv). In light of these concerns, Masters highlights two equally destructive consequences – violence against both self and other – of an excessive policing of the self.

Though the rigor of Masters' attempts to reevaluate and challenge the rigid boundaries of gender normativity is commendable, it falls a bit short in some subtle ways. The book's greatest weakness is most clearly evident in some aspects of Masters' use of language, in his discussions of physicality, and in his attempt to challenge heteronormativity directly with a brief discussion of gay men (which is confined to a single seven-paged chapter out of twenty-nine

total chapters). Despite his best efforts to be inclusive and philosophically liberal, these shortcomings suggest an inadvertent essentialist undertone that seems to undermine his deconstructionist approach.

Ironically enough, though Masters certainly recognizes and addresses the dangers of language that suggest a definite, inflexible essence of manhood, his own use of words comes a bit close at times to suggesting the very same essentialist attitude that he is attempting to dissolve (i.e. "True masculine power happens when courage, integrity, vulnerability, compassion, awareness, and the capacity to take strong action are all functioning together . . ." (xx), and "There is a deeper life for men, a life in which responsibility and freedom go hand in hand and level upon level, a life in which happiness is rooted not in what we have but in what we *fundamentally* are.") Though these definitions of masculinity have been crafted with the best of intentions and deliver a strong, positive message, they are slightly problematic in that, to some extent, they contradict the thesis that there are no ideals, no set "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts."

Moreover, while Masters' discussion of physicality (Chapter 24, "The Penis,") is useful in its explanations of how the obsession over one's body must be relaxed in order to achieve a healthier approach to self-concept ("A man's relationship to his penis says much about his relationship to his egoity. If he identifies with his penis, rising and falling with it, letting its capacity to perform overoccupy him, he is likely to identify with his intellect in the same way, engaging in little or no self-reflection . . ." (pg. 243), it is problematic in its assumption that all men have penises. In this regard, the book is further flawed in its failure to mention transgendered and intersex individuals.

Despite its subtle shortcomings, *To Be a Man* is still of great importance in its therapeutic wisdom and overall applicability to all readers regardless of gender identity. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Virginia Woolf once famously wrote – "the great mind is an androgynous one" – so Masters asserts the importance of allowing oneself to exist beyond rigid, socially prescribed boundaries.

Kimberly L. Wang is a third-year undergraduate at NYU Gallatin pursuing an individualized degree in neuropsychology and a minor in Child and Adolescent Mental Studies. Her academic interests include the natural sciences, philosophy (specifically metaphysics and epistemology), history, language, and the visual arts. In her free time, Kim enjoys listening to and playing music, reading, creative writing, drawing, and being outdoors.