

## AVATARS. THE DESIRE TO BE FEMALE

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One episode of the *Black Mirror* serial particularly caught my eye. *Striking Vipers* is scripted by the series' creator, Charlie Brooker, and directed by Owen Harris. This episode picks up on a theme that has long been exploited by the cinema, that of the avatar. All of the characters in the film (except the 'virtual' ones) are black African-American, with a few white people seen only in passing, in the background.

The protagonists are two old friends, Danny and Karl, who meet again when they are both in their forties. Judging by their homes, they seem to belong to the upper-middle class. Both are fans of a fighting video game, called *Striking Vipers*. Now Karl gives Danny a new version of this game that makes it a virtual reality. The two players, each in their own home, apply a chip to their temple and fall into a kind of catalepsy: only their brains 'act'<sup>1</sup>. While in the past the two wrestlers were manoeuvred at a distance, now the two players become the wrestlers, reincarnate in them, and therefore also perceive the blows and other physical effects of the fight. Among the many possible options, Karl chooses Roxette, a white female wrestler, and Danny chooses a male Japanese wrestler, Lance. The setting of the fight is Japanese, but Roxette is a florid platinum blonde according to the 'white western woman' cliché. The whole thing is very kitschy. The voices of the fighters are male and female, but with intonations and cadences of the real Danny and Karl.

After a first fight in which Roxette-Karl has the upper hand, all of a sudden it happens that, instead of fighting, the two characters kiss... They make love... Several times the two play, but instead of fighting they have sex. This upsets them. The most upset is Danny: he loves Roxette, a semblance of a white woman, so he feels he is cheating on his wife, who is black. But he doesn't feel gay, even if 'behind' Roxette is his friend Karl. The latter, instead, is enthusiastic and would like to go on forever. Has he discovered he is gay? Not at all. They are not attracted to each other. Karl loves Lance, and Danny loves Roxette, their avatars.

Danny-Lance asks Roxette-Karl, in virtual reality, what it feels like to be female in sexual intercourse. Roxette-Karl says it's an amazing thing: being male is like playing a certain piece in a guitar solo, while being female is the same piece played by an entire orchestra. Female pleasure is multiplication of male pleasure.

But then, do Karl and Danny only love each other's virtual avatars? Not even that can be said, because after Danny finally breaks off the game with Karl, the latter tries to find other players with whom to make love instead of fighting; but no other experience equals that with Danny-Lance! It seems that both are sexually attracted to the virtual heroes because their friend is behind them. Of note: Karl doesn't turn gay, he doesn't now go looking for men to get sodomized. He just *likes being a woman* in the love relationship. Today we would say that he's a transgender, even if for limited time.

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<sup>1</sup> The source of inspiration is probably Hilary Putnam's famous 'brains in a vat' argument, itself a modernization of Cartesian doubt: H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge: CUP, 1981.

The two black men for the first time love white humans, which aggravates their disorientation. It is as if the racial difference doubles the sexual difference, as if the invisible transgression of the separation between the races amplifies the implicit transgression in the sexual relationship itself. For those who do psychoanalysis, this film speaks volumes: in a sense, when we love someone and have sex with them, aren't we always, in some way, dealing with the avatar of the other?

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This short film will have appealed to the queer philosophers who thrive in the American world today. But I would like to point out that the duel between a man and a woman, which ends in a loving embrace, is not a modern idea. Torquato Tasso, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*<sup>2</sup> sings to us the duel to the death between the crusader Tancredi and the Islamic female warrior Clorinda, which dissolves in a final baptismal embrace. Tancredi and Clorinda, when they meet, do not make love but war<sup>3</sup>.

As for the enigma 'in sexual intercourse does the man or the woman enjoy it more?', it emerged at the dawn of so-called Western culture.

The ancient Greeks were convinced that women drew far greater pleasure from coitus than men. It is no coincidence that the goddess of the sexual act was female, Aphrodite; *aphrodisiazō* (ἀφροδισιάζω) was a common term for 'I have sex'<sup>4</sup>. This belief was rooted in the myth of Tiresias, the only being who had lived both as a male and a female. One day the gods of Olympus were discussing which of the two, the male or the female, enjoyed intercourse more, so Zeus summoned Tiresias. Tiresias said that the woman enjoys nine times more than the man. Hera did not like this answer at all – her reaction is quite surprising for us today – and blinded Tiresias in revenge (*Ov. Met.* III, 316-338). This quantification of the difference between male and female pleasure is quite close to the nice metaphor of *Striking Vipers*, the male solo against the female orchestra.

Tiresias was perhaps punished because for the Greeks excessive enjoyment was not honourable. The male ideal was *sophrosyne*, temperance. And the woman, whose enjoyment in coitus was excessive because she was intemperate, was not at all idealized at the time. For a millennium we have been steeped in courtly love, invented by the troubadours and minstrels of the High Middle Ages, which gives a substantially sublime image of woman. Only for a few decades, I believe, have we been emerging from this millenary 'film'. For the Greeks, on the other hand, woman was prone to all sensual pleasures, starting with sex and wine. If a man proposed himself to her, she could not resist the temptation. And in fact, when a Greek was cuckolded by his wife or concubine, the seducer was punished, not the woman: woman's 'nature' of not being able to control herself was

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<sup>2</sup> T. Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered: Gerusalemme Liberata*, trans. by Edward Fairfax, Scotts Valley, CA, US: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *Jerusalem Delivered*, XII, 48-70.

<sup>4</sup> Act., of the man: Hp. *Vict.* 3.73, al., (Hippocrates, Heracleitus. *Nature of Man. Regimen in Health. Humours. Aphorisms. Regimen 1-3. Dreams. Heracleitus: On the Universe* trans W. H. S. Jones. Loeb Classical Library 150. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931); *Pl. Rep.* 426a (Plato. *Republic* Vol I: Books 1-5 (ed and trans C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy. Loeb Classical Library 237. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); *Xen. Mem.* 1.3.14 etc., (in: Xenophon. *Memorabilia. Oeconomicus. Symposium. Apology* (trans E. C. Marchant and O. J. Todd. Revised by J. Henderson. Loeb Classical Library 168. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); — Pass., of the woman: *Xen. Hier.* III, 4 (Xenophon *Hiero* in: *Xenophontis Opera Omnia* V. *Opuscula* ed. E. C. Marchant. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); *Arist. HA* 581b.17 *passim* (Aristotle. *History of Animals* Vol III: Books 7-10 ed and trans D. M. Balme. Loeb Classical Library 439. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

taken for granted. Thus, Aristophanes describes women as drunkards and lascivious, closer to Pasolini's underclass than to medieval Madonnas.

Today, however, female enjoyment – which many men consider superior to their own – is a sign of female *superiority*. We are already well beyond standard feminism, which insists on equality between men and women, equality of rights, but also equality of abilities. Today, a theory is increasingly spreading that some radical feminists dare to make explicit, according to which there is a feminine superiority over the male. But few women express this theory – even if many suggest it between the lines – because it would be taken as reverse sexism. Few admit inequalities between genders, just as inequalities in general are inadmissible. Yet the thesis still comes forward.

In the Middle Ages certain beguines, in particular Marguerite Porete in her *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*<sup>5</sup>, had put down in black and white the superiority of women over men. But they were in the odour of heresy, and Marguerite was burned as a heretic in 1310.

In recent decades a whole motif – literary, cinematic, political – of the woman warrior, like Roxette and Clorinda, has flourished. A true epochal turning point was Tarantino's film *Kill Bill* (2003-2004) (Roberto Saviano wrote in *Gomorra* that *Kill Bill* was the cult film of the Neapolitan camorra).

The protagonist of the film has no name, she is the Bride (Uma Thurman) and despite being a Bride, she is a killer, an invincible war machine. The prototype is Joan of Arc. The Bride kills all her rivals, both men and women, in duels using only 'cold steel' weapons (the film is of the oriental martial arts genre), and in the end she kills Bill, the father of her child who had taken her away from her. In *Jerusalem Delivered* in the duel between Tancredi and Clorinda at the end the Christian man wins and the woman dies, but today it would be Clorinda to kill Tancredi. The film gives spectacular evidence to a new feminine ideal: woman as a warlike power. But the fact that the wrestler is the Bride, and that the film ends with a tender one-on-one between mother and daughter, screams like a manifesto: the woman-warrior does not renounce either sex (she is not a maiden like Joan of Arc) or motherhood.

More and more movies illustrate almost invincible female warriors, who are also always beautiful. For example, Luc Besson's movie *La femme Nikita* (1990): here a female gangster is reshaped by the Secret Services as a war-machine who is used as a fool proof killer at the service of French Intelligence. This epic of the woman-warrior has made the armies of Western countries increasingly open to female conscription. And it nourishes the great popularity of women fighters, even if peacefully, such as Rosa Luxemburg, Sophie Scholl, Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi, up to Greta Thunberg, the little girl who fights against the Goliath of the polluting industrial establishment.

But this epic of the woman fighter can be interpreted as a simple counterbalance to the patriarchal tradition: valiant warriors are not only men now, but also women. The thesis of female superiority thus emerges in a more subtle way. The Bride of *Kill Bill* is superior to all her adversaries not only because she is an unsurpassed killer, but also because she was able to give up being a professional assassin and choose maternal love. In psychoanalytic terms, we would say that woman has a phallic, indeed super-phallic valence, no less than man, but she also has an opposite, non-phallic

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<sup>5</sup> Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of the Simple Souls*, trans. by Ellen Babinsky, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993.

valence. I would call this non-phallic valence with the terms of the Rhineland mystics, *Gelassenheit*, abandonment, letting go, letting be. The woman proves to be more successful, more aggressive than the man, but she has the advantage of this abandonment to the maternal and feminine, insofar as in coitus every woman in some ways 'let's herself be'.

Today, the man is supposed to be only masculine, the woman is granted by a double sex.

One dreams therefore of a society saved by women. If women governed, it is said, there would be less war, less violence, less unbridled competition, more compassion for others... However, these feminine qualities are those that patriarchal tradition attributed to women, which are taken up today as political virtues. Evidently this creates an ideological short circuit: on the one hand woman is exalted as a better warrior, as more phallic, than man, on the other hand as the one who brings love and not war. This is the crux of the modern encomium of woman.

In radical feminism the woman is considered in perspective the saviour of human society, as far as the woman opposes to all will for power, and this will for power is considered the basic principle of the patriarchal society. A matriarchal society will be a sort of a new Golden Age: no more war, aggression, competition, exploitation, dominance... This is the main dream narrative of today.

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This sense of female superiority, however, is evident across the board, for example in the experience in psychoanalytic studies, as well as in changing customs.

Psychoanalysis from the beginning has highlighted the envy of the opposite sex. In truth Freud had seen mainly the female desire for the male, the *Penisneid*, the envy of the penis. Yet in the clinical case of the Wolf Man (Freud [1914] 1918), it is evident that the patient adheres to a deep feminine identification. For several decades now, analysts have rather insisted on men's envy of femininity.

In fact, until few years ago the typical transgender person was M to F, afterwards there was an overturning: now the majority of transitions are F to M. Again a *Penisneid*? Maybe the transgender prefers to be what is currently considered the weakest gender...

I have encountered several men very similar to the Karl in *Striking Vipers*. They are heterosexual, sometimes even womanizers, who occasionally have what one called 'bouts of femininity': they have to get sodomized by a man. They are not sensitive to male charm; they are sensitive only to the penis. The most famous psychotic of the twentieth century, the president of the Court of Appeal of Saxony Daniel Paul Schreber, author of a famous autobiography, began to be delirious when he asked himself the question, 'What does a woman feel during coitus?' These 'attacks of femininity' answer the same question. That which Julius Caesar had to ask himself, of whom it was said 'he is the husband of all the women of Rome, he is the wife of all the men of Rome'<sup>6</sup>. Bisexuality appears, today as then, a sign of absolute and imperial sovereignty.

The most common case is that of heterosexual men falling in love with unoperated transgender men. An analysand of mine whose sexual practice was limited to going to escorts who specialized in masochists (*mistresses*) cherished the erotic fantasy of being sodomized by androgynous trans

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<sup>6</sup> Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum*. Liber I. Divus Iulius 52: *omnium mulierum virum et omnium virorum mulierem appellat*. Recall that at the time there was nothing more degrading to a man than being penetrated. While a man could boast of having penetrated another man (Suetonius. *Lives of the Caesars*. Vol I (trans) J. C. Rolfe. Loeb Classical Library 31. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

men; never of being sodomized by normal men. These men live a logically reckless sexuality: they are very attracted to women, but to women with a penis. For them, what turns them on most in a woman...is the penis. They want a woman to mirror them.

An American transgender psychoanalyst F to M, Griffin Hansbury<sup>7</sup>, has hypothesized the presence of the Vagina, mostly fantasized, in all human beings, not only in transgender people. Every human being has a Vagina, which they often tend to 'use' if only imaginatively. Some passive homosexuals actually experience their anus as a vagina; this is why they are interested exclusively in passive relationships with men. Hansbury wants to correct Freud's view, echoed by Lacan, that both men and women are 'phallic', in the sense that the man has the phallus and the woman wants to receive it, but at the centre is always the phallus. According to Hansbury there is a kind of original vaginality. Thus spoke Tiresias the Psychoanalyst.

I have met several men who frequent, with their partners, swinging places. The world is dotted with an archipelago of hotels, clubs, resorts, where one exchanges partners between two couples. Actually, many of these men don't want to swap: what makes them enjoy it is watching their partner having sex with another man or another woman and taking pleasure in it. This is what I have called 'negative jealousy', as opposed to positive jealousy, the one properly called: to ardently desire that one's woman goes with others. Negative jealousy in fact does not exclude positive jealousy at all, on the contrary: if one's woman has an affair with another man without him, the subject, being allowed to participate or without knowing anything about it, will make jealous scenes completely conventional, to say the least. The important thing is one's own *theoretical* control (from the Greek *thea*, spectacle, and *horan* observe) over enjoyment of the woman by others. If this control is missing the man feels betrayed. I think we can explain this theoretical enjoyment (assimilated to masochism) with an identification of the man with the woman: he does not let himself be penetrated directly by a man, like Caesar, but his woman becomes his narcissistic substitute. His woman becomes his own avatar. The important thing is that the woman, or rather themselves, enjoys a penis as massive as possible. Let us say that in this way the subject, like Karl in *Black Mirror*, enjoys the phallic man through an intermediary, while the female body remains his object of attraction.

Many forms of masochism and fetishism (the two usually imply each other) are understandable only through the identification of the man to the woman: in both cases, you want to give the woman an extraordinary power<sup>8</sup>. The stereotype masochist who goes to a 'mistress' to be flogged and humiliated, wants to give back to the woman a phallic power that exceeds. And Freud saw right when he interpreted the fetishist's fetish - usually, the shoes a woman wears, or her feet - as a surrogate penis, as if the fetish phallicized the woman.

This phallicization of women is now supported and respected by men, especially in the more educated and urbanized classes. This appears more clearly through novels, films and videos than through books of social psychology or psychoanalysis. Today, if, in a film or novel, a woman cheats on her M-partner, she is almost always ipso facto forgiven. In fact, the man says 'It's all my fault!', as if he had deserved the cuckoldry. A cheated man who would make an old-fashioned blunder, kicking the woman out of the house or beating her, would be portrayed as a boor, a backwater, a morbid case. Note that the reverse is not true: if in a film or a novel of a certain level a man has an affair with another woman, the cheated woman will get angry and maybe kick the

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<sup>7</sup> G. Hansbury, *The masculine Vaginal: Working with queer men's embodiment at the transgender edge. Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 65 (6): 1009-31, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> I developed an analysis of masochism in: S. Benvenuto, *What are Perversions?* London: Karnac, 2016.

husband out of the house. In short, her jealousy is shown as completely legitimate. It is the reversal of traditional morality (which was in force until a few decades ago), according to which male betrayals were mostly irrelevant, while the infidelity of the woman was a serious act. It is as if we had returned to the morals of the ancient Greeks, when the unfaithful woman was always forgiven - although now for the opposite reasons. At that time the unfaithful woman was not punished because she was considered irresponsible like a child, but today she is forgiven because it is her right, I would say her privilege, to be unfaithful.

People may object that the crime columns are full of femicides or *gynicides* motivated by jealousy; in short, that male possessiveness is the same as in the past, if not worse. Frankly, I have serious doubts about the fact that today more women are killed for reasons of passion than in the past. In fact, crime statistics show that the number of *gynicides* has remained stable over 30 years, at least in Italy. But even if male jealousy killings were increasing, this would prove a growing male fragility: it is as if a backward-looking male area, lagging behind the times, does not know how to adapt to the new female power and reacts destructively to change. In fact, the man who kills a woman because he was left by her destroys his own life too: either he will kill himself just after the murder, or he will spend the rest of his life in prison surrounded by public contempt.

A reversal of the *gynicide* scenario is to be found in Justine Triet's film *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023). A struggling writer dies plunging from a window, and his wife—who has achieved success—is accused of causing the plunge. Suicide or androicide? It is the reverse of the typical feminist plot in which the woman who has been more successful than her spouse is killed. In the end, the woman is acquitted, and yet... part of the audience doesn't believe it, they think it was her who threw her husband out the window. Even though she really had no serious reason to do so. Clearly, the film destabilizes all prevailing narratives, and this aura of freedom fills the audience, regularly inundated by a tide of woke propaganda, with pleasure.

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Now, all these figures of the phallicized woman - the warrior Bride, the woman who enjoys with other men, the sado-masochistic or fetishized woman, the sovereign woman - seem to disprove a whole line of feminist thought that insists instead on non-phallic female values, on what I have called *Gelassenheit*. Indeed, the process of gender egalitarianization that has been going on for the past fifty years has been increasingly directed toward a masculinization of women, not really toward a convergent feminization of men. It is still found quite normal for a wife to not work and be a housewife, while the man brings money home; the reverse case is not appreciated at all. I know many cases of men who are kept by their women: they are often regarded almost as pimps. Women tend to do jobs once considered male (military, entrepreneurs, truck drivers, politicians, magistrates, airline pilots...), but we cannot say at all that men flock to do classically female jobs (elementary teachers, seamstresses, prostitutes, maids, secretaries, nurses). It's not enough for boys to put on an earring or for men to help with housework to be considered feminized. Women can wear pants, men cannot wear skirts, even if they are Scots. Woman socially has two genders, man only one. The core values of our society remain masculine in the traditional sense: competitiveness, productivity, hard work, will for power... It was the modern woman who equaled the man, not the other way around. It is as if female superiority then consisted in being bi-gender, as is her sexual apparatus, vaginal and clitoral.

Even rightist men welcome the idea that women are more phallic than men. For example, male Italians who admire our present Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a semi-fascist politician, like to say 'this woman really has balls!'

Women's occupation of positions of power does not in fact lead to real power change. Lady Thatcher's government was particularly ironclad and she victoriously led one war, the Falklands/Malvinas war of 1982. As for the long Merkel government, I do not see any glaring differences with another male-led conservative government; indeed, Merkel was particularly harsh in her handling of the Greek economic crisis in 2016. In Italy, both government and oppositions are led by two women. In France, the real challenge to the political power comes from Marine Le Pen. I have not noticed former U.S. Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton, or the current President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, or the President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde, or the president of the Russian Central Bank Elvira Nabiullina... give a special feminine style to their function. The truth is that the increasing participation of women in scientific research, philosophical reflection, entrepreneurial activity, government issues... has not changed the paradigms of these fields at all. This is not because women would find themselves operating in a 'masculinized' world, but because every role implies certain games, and the rules of the games are those, regardless of the gender of the players. If a woman wants to play chess, the rules are the same as for a man. Is there *a feminine way* to play chess? If a country has to wage a war, it will do so even if the leader is a peaceful woman. I am sorry to disappoint those who believe that 'women will save us', I do not think salvation is a gender issue. Although it would be nice if that were true.

In general, then, we seem to be moving toward a uni-gender, i.e. hyper-phallic, society. And I said that women today are particularly praised and envied for their hyper-phallicity. In general, the radical feminist polemical style is reminiscent of the bravery of the warrior rather than of the mildness usually attributed to the feminine touch. My impression is that even radical feminism in fact works for the contemporary masculinization of women.

A Russian psychoanalyst told me a joke. Two children of the same age, a boy and a girl, often play in the yard. But the boy is poor and has very few toys, while the girl is rich and has many toys that she proudly shows off to her friend. At a certain point, out of revenge, he pulls out his penis and says: 'And I've got this instead!' The girl is shocked, cries and runs away. But she comes back a little later beaming: 'I asked my mother why I don't have one. And she said, "Don't worry, when you get older, you'll have hundreds, as many as you like"'. An instructive joke, because it explains much of the assumption of superiority of women: *they are more phallic than men*. It's like the Roxette orchestra compared to the masculine solo. But then, is this half-baked, creeping theory of female superiority just about a phallic superiority? Or, in spite of everything, does a female *plus* emerge that is not simply a phallic *plus*?" This is the essential point.

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Where, then, does this growing consideration of female superiority come from? I want to see it mostly from the male side.

It would be too easy to reduce this Praise of women to a new form of chivalry, to intellectual philandering. This male exaltation of female superiority is at once sincere and adulating, and it is accompanied by a certain self-deceit of many men as 'feminine at heart'. In this way, many men transversally affirm their own superiority by proclaiming themselves feminine, that is, belonging to the superior sex...

A man dedicated to classic masochistic practices first told me that he felt quite feminine. The point is that he is, in fact, a radically misogynistic man, for him women are all 'sluts'... How could his identification with women and the deep resentment he harboured towards women coexist? I think this combination is typical in maso-fetishists, as I call them.

Masochistic practices of various kinds – where a woman is always the executioner of a man - seem to me to respond to a kind of *reparation* of the woman. The woman is considered a victim, a helpless being who must be protected, and therefore the male subject must give her back a phallic power that she lacks. But on the other hand, he identifies himself with the woman, in the sense that he too feels like a victim, defenceless, compared to a super-male who can dominate him. On the one hand, he makes up for the lack in the woman by offering himself as an object of rejection and humiliation; on the other hand, rejection and humiliation seem to him to be a metaphor for that femininity in which he would like to participate. In other words, by renouncing his own phallic mastery over the woman, by giving this mastery to the woman herself, he renounces mastery and accesses a dimension of enjoyment of *lordship*.

To understand the difference between mastery and lordship, we need only think of the kind of enjoyment that tragic plays give us, especially those that end with the defeat of the hero or heroine. For centuries we have been asking, ‘What is it about tragic plays that makes us enjoy them?’ ‘Why does mourning the sad fate of the heroes with whom we identify give us a poignant pleasure?’ ‘What is this mysterious *catharsis*, of which Aristotle spoke, or the ultimate enjoyment that the tragic work gives us?’ It is, however, a *jouissance* connected precisely to the renunciation of mastery, of power. And in the case of ‘tragic sex’, we have the renunciation to phallic power. But this renunciation to the phallic power – renunciation which the maso-fetishist blatantly stages - marks the access to the *Aufhebung*, elevation in Hegelian sense, to a mastery of a higher order, which I would call lordship. This is the pleasure that pessimistic visions give us, for example. The pleasure of mastery is replaced by the enjoyment of lordship.

In this sense, the exaltation of today’s super-phallic woman is the other side of a compassion for woman, a compassion for her being-beyond phallic performance. On the one hand it is said ‘woman must be equal to man, that is she should be phallic’, but on the other hand man envies in woman something that man seems, if not foreclosed, much more difficult to achieve: that *Gelassenheit* in letting the world be. Behind the shining and invincible fighting woman, it is her desire to simply be *a woman* that attracts.

### Abbreviations

Ov. *Met.* Ovid. *Metamorphoses Volume I: Books 1-8* (trans) F. J. Miller. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 42. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

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