Richard V. Reeves, Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It (Brookings Institution Press, 2022)

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My favorite scholar is the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). He received his fair share of accolades and honors in his lifetime, as I indicate in my survey of his life in my book Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication, 2nd ed. (2015, pp. 33-53). However, he was not lionized. Consequently, perhaps it is not surprising that Richard V. Reeves of the Brookings Institution does not refer to Ong in his 2022 book Of Boys and Men.

Now, Ong’s first major book about his pioneering media ecology theory is his massively researched study of the print culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s titled Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason] (1958). Ong’s massively researched 1958 book RMDD is about the history of the verbal arts of logic (also known as dialectic) and rhetoric in Western cultural history from antiquity down to and beyond the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572).

I have discussed Ong’s philosophical thought in his massively researched 1958 book RMDD and elsewhere in his mature work from the early 1950s onward in my OEN article “Walter J. Ong’s Philosophical Thought” (dated September 20, 2020).


Today the English Renaissance poet John Milton (1608-1674) is most widely known for his poem Paradise Lost. However, we should not forget that Milton was also famous in his day as a polemical pamphleteer. Ong’s second major book about his pioneering media ecology theory is his beautiful 1967 seminal book The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History, the expanded version of Ong’s 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University. In Ong’s beautiful 1967 seminal book, he discusses the polemical cast of formal education in Western culture from antiquity onward, as manifested in the history of the verbal arts of logic (also known as dialectic) and rhetoric from antiquity onward to the eventual waning of the polemical cast of formal education when girls and women in Western culture entered colleges and
universities. For specific page references to polemic in Ong’s beautiful 1967 seminal book, see the “Index” (p. 354).

What Ong refers to as the polemical cast of formal education in Western cultural history from antiquity onward was primarily for boys. It predominated until laws mandating compulsory primary and secondary education for girls and boys led to its demise. Moreover, the centuries-old pattern of the polemical cast of formal education for boys was congruent with and compatible with the more extensive agonistic cast of other cultural orientations in Western culture, as Johan Huizinga describes these other cultural orientations in his classic study *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1950; the translator is not identified on the title page or in the “Translator’s Note” [p. vii], in which he informs us that it is based on the 1944 German edition, published in Switzerland, and on Huizinga’s own English translation; Huizinga’s “Foreword” [p. ix] is dated Leyden, June 1938) – a classic work that Ong does not happen to advert to explicitly in his beautiful 1967 seminal book in his extensive discussion of the polemical orientation in Western cultural history.\(^3\)

Now, for all practical purposes, we could say that what Ong refers to as the polemical cast of formal education for centuries in Western culture was part of the much more extensive agonistic orientation of other cultural arrangements in Western culture – which, when taken together, formed a widespread agonistic network of cultural arrangements, an inter-related network of cultural arrangements that still prevails today in Western culture.

Now, with Father Ong’s permission, I unofficially audited his graduate course on Polemic in Literary and Academic Tradition: An Historical Survey at Saint Louis University in the summer of 1971. I was deeply impressed by Ong’s presentations in the course. Subsequently, I drew on some of Ong’s ideas in the course in my article “The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric” in the NCTE journal *College English* (April 1979).


Now, Donald J. Trump represents a strongly oriented polemical stance in life. Such a strongly oriented polemical stance in life represents what the late Jungian psychotherapist and psychological theorist Robert L. Moore (1942-2016) refers to as a shadow form of the
masculine Warrior archetype in all human psyches. In a series of five books that Moore co-authored with Douglas Gillette in the 1990s, he set forth his Jungian theory of the four masculine archetypes of maturity, which are present in all human psyches—just as the corresponding four feminine archetypes of maturity are also present in all human psyches. According to Moore, all of us need to work to access the optimal forms of the four masculine and the four feminine archetypes of maturity in our psyches. But this is easier said than done. You see, according to Moore, the four masculine and the four feminine archetypes of maturity in all human psyches come with built-in shadow forms—to be more precise, each archetype of maturity has two shadow forms (and one optimal form).

In any event, Moore and Gillette provide an accessible account of the four masculine archetypes of maturity in their 1990 book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*. In it, they discuss Boy Psychology (pp. 13-42) and Man Psychology (pp. 43-45; but also see pp. 47-141). For Moore and Gillette, pro-social masculinity involves learning how to access and embody the optimal forms of the four masculine archetypes of maturity. Moore and Gillette provide their most detailed discussion of the sadist shadow form of the masculine Warrior archetype that Trump represents in their 1992 book *The Warrior Within: Accessing the Knight [Archetype] in the Male Psyche* (esp. pp. 132-142).

Now, Richard V. Reeves of the Brookings Institution published the deeply researched and thought-provoking 2022 book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It* (Brookings Institution Press). In it, he constructs his presentation in five parts, with each part including graphically titled chapters, which in turn are sub-divided into subsections. The names of the five parts are most instructive: Part I: “The Male Malaise” (consisting of chapters 1-3; pp. 3-42); Part II: “Double Disadvantage” (consisting of chapters 4-6; pp. 45-81); Part III: “Biology and Culture” (consisting of chapter 7; pp. 85-102); Part IV: “Political Stalemate” (consisting of chapters 8-9; pp. 105-129); and Part V: “What to Do” (consisting of chapters 10-12; pp. 133-182). His book also includes an “Epilogue” (pp. 183-184); “Acknowledgments” (p. 185); “Notes” (pp. 186-233); and an “Index” (pp. 234-242—which includes eight main entries that begin with the word “Gender” [p. 237]). In Reeves’ “Preface” (pp. ix-xiii), he explains “six main reasons” why he was motivated to write his 2022 book *Of Boys and Men* (pp. x-xii).

Now, Reeves restricts himself to discussing formal education in recent Western cultural history after compulsory elementary and secondary formal education included girls and after girls and women in Western culture entered colleges and universities.

In short, Reeves knows nothing about the centuries of formal education in Western cultural history when the polemic cast of formal education that Ong writes about in his beautiful 1967 seminal book predominated—and when formal education was predominantly for boys.

Now, the self-styled conservative columnist at the *New York Times*, David Brooks, hailed Reeves’ 2022 book *Of Boys and Men* as “a landmark, one of the most important books of the year” in his column titled “The Crisis of Men and Boys” (dated September 29, 2022).

In addition, the self-styled liberal columnist at the *New York Times*, Michelle Goldberg, also wrote about Reeves’ 2022 book *Of Boys and Men* in her column titled “Boys and Men Are in Crisis Because Society Is” (dated October 3, 2022). When she refers to society today being in crisis, that societal crisis can be interpreted as the ongoing rolling crisis, as it were, involved in what Ong refers to as the ongoing rolling transition from the print culture that emerged in
Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s to the still emerging secondary oral culture (in Ong’s terminology).


On p. 3 of the 48-page printout, Klein says that “men were basically all college graduates for almost the entire time there’s been such a thing as college.” That’s an historical statement. As sweeping generalizations go, Klein’s sweeping generalization is not untrue. However, “for almost the entire time there’s been such a thing as college” in Western culture, only a small percentage of males ever became college graduates. Yes, we could focus our attention on the exclusion of women from college until relatively recently. However, until relatively recently a substantial percentage of men were also excluded from college. Please don’t misunderstand me here. I am not advocating that all women and/or all men should go to college. But I should also point out here that Klein’s sweeping generalization that “men were basically all college graduates for almost the entire time there’s been such a thing as college” should remind us that Ong’s discussion of the polemic cast of formal education in Western culture involved male students who themselves represented a comparatively elite percentage of the male population.

On p. 8 of the 48-page printout, Reeves himself seems to make an historical statement when he refers to something “baked into the education system.” However, it is abundantly clear that Reeves is referring only to the education system after compulsory formal education of girls and boys became mandatory in Western cultural history.

Surprise, surprise. For centuries before the formal education for girls and boys was mandated by law in our Western cultural history, what Ong refers to as the polemic cast in formal education in Western cultural history was “baked into the education system” (to use Reeve’s words) – that is, it was baked into the education system in Western culture until the polemic cast of formal education waned with the rise of compulsory education for girls and boys.

When it comes to history, both Reeves and Klein can refer only to “the history of the 1970s and 1980s” (p. 10)! In short, they can refer to only recent history – not to the history of Western culture from antiquity to the present.

On p. 12 of the 48-page printout, Reeves recounts one of the most startling facts that he recounts in his 2022 book *Of Boys and Men*. Reeves says, “But at that time when Title IX was passed [in 1972], boys, young men, were about 13 percentage points more likely to get a four-year college degree than girls. Now, girls, young women, are about 15 percentage points more
likely to get a college degree than boys and young men. And so we have Title IX level gender
gap in higher education now, it’s just the other way around [from 1972]."

In Reeves’ Chapter 1: “Girls Rule: Boys Are Behind in Education” in his 2022 book Of Boys
and Men (pp. 3-17), he makes these dramatic points on p. 3.

Now, on p. 10 of the 48-page printout, Reeves refers to “toxic masculinity.” Granted, it is
possible to operationally define and explain carefully what all you might mean by toxic
masculinity. Reeves does this in his 2022 book Of Boys and Men (esp. pp. 105-109; but also
see pp. xii, 54, 117, and 122). In Reeves’ 2022 book Of Boys and Men, he does discuss
Trump as representing toxic masculinity (p. 107).

I mentioned Trump above, and I also mentioned Moore’ Jungian account of the sadist shadow
form of the masculine Warrior archetype of maturity. Perhaps we could operationally define
and explain the sadist shadow form of the masculine Warrior archetype of maturity as
manifesting itself as toxic masculinity, eh?

In Reeves’ subsection “Deaths of Despair” in his 2022 book Of Boys and Men (pp. 61-63), he
says, “When Donald Trump talked about ‘American carnage’ in his inaugural address, I admit
to having rolled my eyes. I thought it was ridiculous hyperbole. Now I think it was only
hyperbole. Trump knew who he was talking to. The counties with the most deaths of despair
were the one who swung most decisively to him in 2016, compared to Mitt Romney’s
performance in 2012. These are the communities where employment has declined most
sharply, especially for men” (pp. 61-62).

In Reeves’ subsection “Cultural Animals” in his 2022 book Of Boys and Men (pp. 94-95), he
says, “As Joseph Henrich argues, it makes [the] most sense to think of the co-evolution of
nature and nurture. ‘Culture rewires our brains and alters our biology,’ he says, ‘without
altering the underlying genetic code.’ When humans learned how to use fire, we started to eat
more meat, for example, and our digestive systems adapted. Literacy changed the psychology
of many people who became what Henrich calls WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized,
rich, and democratic)” (p. 95; italics in Reeves’ text).

In Ong’s “Preface” to his 1977 350-page book Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution
of Consciousness and Culture (pp. 9-13), he says the following in the first sentence: “The
present volume carries forward work in two earlier volumes by the same author, The Presence
of the Word (1967) and Rhetoric Romance, and Technology (1971).” He then discusses these
two earlier volumes.

Then Ong says, “The thesis of these two earlier works is sweeping, but it is not reductionist, as
reviewers and commentators, so far as I know, have all generously recognized: the works do
not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to an electronic
culture, which produces secondary orality, causes or explain everything in human culture and
consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all
major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy,
to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are
varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish” (pp. 9-10).

Thus, Ong himself claims (1) that his thesis is “sweeping” but (2) that the shifts do not “cause
or explain everything in human culture and consciousness” and (3) that the shifts are related to
“major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness.”

Major cultural developments include the rise of modern science, the rise of modern capitalism, the rise of representative democracy, the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of the Romantic Movement in philosophy, literature, and the arts.


Next in Ong’s 1977 “Preface,” he explains certain lines of investigation that he further develops in *Interfaces of the Word*. Then he says, “At a few points, I refer in passing to the work of French and other European structuralists – variously psychoanalytic, phenomenological, linguistic, or anthropological in cast” (p. 10). Ong liked to characterize his own thought as phenomenological and personalist in cast.

However, as I say, Ong is not everybody’s cup of tea, figuratively speaking. Consider, for example, Ong’s own modesty in the subtitle of his beautiful 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, mentioned above. His wording “Some Prolegomena” clearly acknowledges that he does not explicitly claim that his thesis as he formulated it in his 1977 “Preface” does “explain everything in human culture and consciousness” – or every cause -- but that the shifts he points out are ”sweeping.”

Now, please note just how careful and cagey Ong’s wording is when he says that his account of the evolution of certain changes does not “explain everything in human culture and consciousness” – or every cause.

On the one hand, Ong’s terminology about primary oral culture (and primary orality, for short; and his earlier terminology about primarily oral culture) is sweeping inasmuch as it refers to all of our pre-historic human ancestors.

On the other hand, his cagey remark about sorting out cause and effect does not automatically rule out the possibility that certain changes somehow contributed to the eventual historical development of writing systems and specifically phonetic alphabetic writing (= literacy) as well as to the historical development of human settlement in agriculture (or agrarian) societies and economies.

Now, in Reeves’ subsection “Fragile Manhood” in in his 2022 book *Of Boys and Men* (pp. 95-97), he says, “Anthropologists all agree: Manhood is fragile. Womanhood is more robust because it is more determined by women’s specific role in reproduction. As the feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner writes, ‘It is simply a fact that proportionately more of women’s body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime . . . is taken up with the natural processes surrounding reproduction of the species.’ Womanhood is defined more by biology, manhood
more by social construction. This is why masculinity tends to be more fragile than femininity. When was the last ‘crisis of femininity’? That’s right: never” (pp. 95-96; the ellipsis is in Reeves’ text).

It strikes me that what Reeves says here about “manhood [being defined] more by social construction [than by biology]” is most pertinent to his observations about the contemporary problem that he discusses in the subsection “The Haphazard Self” (pp. 67-68). There he says, “Without a [cultural] script, there is no choice for many men except to improvise. But improvising a successful life is a very difficult task. ‘A model of stable masculinity [e.g., the model of the masculine archetypes of maturity delineated by Moore and Gillette,’ writes David Morgan, ‘would include a relatively high degree of congruence between public discourses about masculinity and public and private practices of masculinity. For individual men, there would be a sense of ontological security.’ This is not a great slogan. ‘What do we want? Ontological security! When do we want it? Now!’ But this is in fact exactly what men are seeking; a more solid social anchor, more certainty about how to be in the world” (p. 67; italics in Reeves’ text).

Several comments are in order here about this quote from Reeves. Cultural scripts of masculinity about in movies and television in American culture today. Heroes and villains are common masculine scripts, including super-heroes and super-villains. These common masculine cultural scripts hearken back to ancient masculine culture scripts from the heroic age in Western culture that produced such enduring literary works as the Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey. For this reason, Ong would see these common masculine cultural scripts about super-heroes and super-villains as culturally regressive. Besides that, the scripts about super-heroes and super-villains are unrealistic as models of stable masculinity, to say the least.

For Ong, the twentieth-century philosophical movement known as existentialism, which Ong prefers to refer to as personalism, represents a realistic model of mature masculinity. On a more personal level, Ong saw the Society of Jesus (known popularly as the Jesuit order) as his own way of proceeding to work out in his personal life a model of stable masculinity. It is worth noting here that what Ong characterizes as personalism in philosophy emphasizes individual personal decision making, and so does Jesuit spirituality. In Jesuit spirituality, this emphasis involves what is known as discernment of spirits in one’s psyche involved in one’s decision making. Ong discusses this orientation of Jesuit spirituality in his article “A.M.D.G.: Dedication or Directive?” in the Jesuit-sponsored but now defunct journal Review for Religious (September 1952). In it, Ong argues that the Jesuit motto abbreviated A.M.D.G. and often inscribed as a dedication was understood by the Spanish Renaissance mystic St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order, as a directive to be followed in the context of discernment of spirits in one’s psyche and decision make. The Latin motto Ad majorem Dei gloriam means “For the greater glory of God.” Ong’s 1952 article in reprinted in volume three of Ong’s Faith and Contexts, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A Soukup (1995, pp. 1-8). Ong reprises the argument of his 1952 article in his 1986 book Hopkins, the Self, and God (pp. 78-81 and 87), the published version of Ong’s 1981 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

For Moore and Gillette, a men’s movement in American culture, modeled on the women’s movement, held positive potential for the pro-social development of American men in contemporary American culture. But nothing much came of the men’s movement. I should point out here that the fledgling Jesuit order founded by St. Ignatius Loyola represented a kind
of small-scale men’s movements in its day. However, I do not mean to suggest that only the Jesuit order can be understood as a small-scale men’s movement. On the contrary, I would suggest that all religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church can be understood as small-scale men’s movements and small-scale women’s movements.

If Reeves is correct in claiming that manhood is defined “more by social construction” than by male biology, then we may wonder about Ong’s argument in his 1981 book Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness, mentioned above. In it, he argues that boys and men tend to be more strongly oriented toward agonistic behavior than girls and women tend to be. In addition, he suggests that the male hormone testosterone may play a part in accounting for this difference in agonistic behavior. In Reeves’ 2022 book Of Boys and Men, he discusses testosterone (pp. 88-90, 95, 100, and 111).

Perhaps I should offer here a graphic understanding of what Ong means by the word “more” when he claims that boys and men tend to be more strongly oriented toward agonistic behavior than girls and women tend to be (or at least tended to be before the impact of the women’s movement on girls and women). First, we need to imagine that what Ong refers to as agonistic tendencies could somehow be quantified and measured. Next, we need to imagine that those quantified measures could also be graphed. I would expect the two graphs not to overlap. I would suggest that we should imagine the central mean of each graph as not overlapping, but a differing – with the mean of the masculine graph as exceeding the mean of the feminine graph (hence, as representing quantitatively “more” or greater agonistic tendencies).

Ah, but does Reeves say much about what Ong in his 1981 book refers to as male agonistic behavior – which Ong refers to in his beautiful 1967 seminal book as polemic. No, Reeves does not use Ong’s terminology from his 1981 or 1967 books. But Reeves discusses our contemporary polarized cultural polemics in American culture extensively (for specific page references, see the entries on Political Left and Political Right in the “Index” [p. 240]). Ah, but would Reeves’ discussion of our contemporary polarized American culture have been improved had he read Ong’s 1981 and 1967 books and used his terminology? Your guess is as good as mine.

Now, in Reeves’ subsection “Grievance Politics” in his 2022 book Of Boys and Men (pp. 118-126), he says, “Donald Trump secured the presidency of the United States in 2016 with a 24-point lead among men, the widest gender gap in the half-century history of exit polling. Among white men, who make up a third of the electorate, Trump’s margin was 30 percentage points (62% to 32%). Women tilted toward the Democrats, but only to about the same degree as in previous elections. ‘The gender gap widened this year for the same reason Trump took the White House,’ reported the Washington Post. ‘Men, especially white men, surged right.’ . . . Note that even as he lost in 2020, Trump still won most of the male vote, and actually increased his support among Black and Latino men” (pp. 118 and 119; my ellipsis).

Now, for further discussion of certain issues that are relevant to Reeves’ 2022 book Of Boys and Men, see Thomas B. Edsall’s column in the New York Times titled “‘There Are Two Americas Now: One with a B.A. and One Without’” (dated October 5, 2022).

In conclusion, Reeves alerts us to certain disturbing trends involving boys and men in the United States today.
Notes
1 It was re-issued in a new paperback edition by the University of Chicago Press in 2004 with a "Foreword" by Adrian Johns (pp. v-xii).
2 It was re-issued in a paperback edition by the University of Minnesota Press in 1981, and then again in 1991. More recently, it was re-issued in a paperback edition by Global Publications in 2000 with the "Preface to the 2000 Paperback Edition" by Thomas J. Farrell (pp. xiii-xxvi).
3 However, in Ong’s beautiful 1967 seminal book, he does explicitly advert (pp. 31 and 201) to Huizinga’s other classic study The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries, translated by F. Hopman (Longmans, Green, 1948; based on the second Dutch edition of 1921, but with revisions of it by Huizinga, according to Huizinga’s "Preface," which is dated Leyden, April 1924 [pp. 5-6]). More recently, Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch have re-translated it as The Autumn of the Middle Ages (University of Chicago Press, 1996; based on the 1921 edition).
4 For further reading about Trump, see Dr. Justin A. Frank’s 2018 book Trump on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President.

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