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Genius, Masculinity and Intersectionality: Thomas Thorild and the Discussion about Genius in the Late 18th Century

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Genius, or in Swedish ‘snille’, was a much debated concept in the late 18th century. It was ambiguous in gender terms since it sometimes was associated with masculinity and sometimes femininity. In both cases genius was primarily considered to be owned by men.

The paper deals with the Swedish writer Thomas Thorild (1759-1808) and his participation in the discussion about genius. He frequently talks of the manliness of the genius, in the sense of maturity and perfection. In other cases he sees a similarity between geniuses and women. This might be a way for him to distance himself as a genius from ordinary men, whom he considers stupid, insensitive and in possession of an animal-like strength, as opposed to the angelic strength of women and geniuses. By the use of metaphors Thorild creates counter images of noblemen, children, youths, savages, the mob, fools and animals, whose common denominator is their lack of the strong and virtuous feeling of the genius. In this way intersections between gender and ideas of age and class are raised. The paper will discuss how history of masculinity and perspectives of intersectionality can be combined to get a better understanding of the various meanings of the concept of manliness.

GENDER, MASCULINITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY - Thomas Thorild and the discussion about genius in the late 18th century

Genius, or in Swedish ‘snille’, was a much debated concept in the late 18th century. It was ambiguous in gender terms since it sometimes was associated with masculinity and sometimes femininity. In both cases genius was primarily considered to be owned by men.¹ The paper deals with the Swedish writer Thomas Thorild (1759-1808) and his participation in the discussion about genius. In this debate he frequently talks of the genius as manly. In other cases he sees a similarity between geniuses and women, whom he claims are in possession of a virtuous angelic strength as opposed to the violent animal-like strength of men. What kind of manliness is Thorild talking about and how does it relate to his positive view of women and femininity? To bring some clarity into the use of the concept of manliness in the late 18th century debate about genius, I want to discuss how the history of masculinity can be combined with the perspective of intersectionality.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE VARIOUS MEANINGS OF MANLINESS

A problem that has arisen from the resent research in the history of masculinity is the various meanings of the concept of manliness in the past. In many cases it was primarily connected to issues of age, class and ethnicity rather than those of gender and sex. The Swedish historians of masculinity have mostly been focused on the discourses of manliness to investigate what was considered manly in different times and contexts. A difficulty that arises when the terms manliness or masculinity are used as analytical tools is that the ambiguity of the concept might conceal the aspects of age, class and ethnicity, since the contemporary everyday use of the notion of manliness implies a meaning primarily related to gender and sexuality. Today manliness is most of the time used as opposed to femininity, which was not the case in the 18th century.

One solution to the problem, which has been proposed by the historian Jonas Liliequist, is to try to screen out only the gender aspects of the concept. In that way we should be able to get clean masculinity analyses and avoid studies that seem to be about masculinity as a gender issue, but is in fact dealing with other social categorisations.² In this paper I will look at another solution and instead propose a way to investigate precisely that plurality of meaning that I think is one of the most interesting findings in the historical research of masculinity. By the use of the concept of intersectionality we may be able to facilitate the understanding of the multiplicity of the notion of manliness. I’m going to use the word manliness, since it is the best equivalent of the Swedish “manlighet”, which is the word I am investigating in the writings of Thorild. I only use the modern term masculinity when talking about contemporary issues within the field called the history of masculinity.

Intersectional theory has been more common in contemporary studies, but recently its relevance for historians has been discussed for example by Helena Tolvhed in a special feature issue of the journal Scandia on intersectional history.³ It can be described as a theory that views the different categorisations, which serve as grounds for discrimination, as intertwined and mutually constitutive. The concept was introduced 20 years ago by Kimberlé Crenshaw within the field of Black feminism. Researchers in this field have realised that the subordination of black women was different from that of “women” as well as “black people”.

¹ Battersby, Christine, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London 1989).

² Liliequist, Jonas, ”Manlighetens flytande gränser – om manlighet som analytisk kategori i historiska analyser.” in *Scandia* 74:1 (2010), pp. 93–96.

³ Tolvhed, Helena, ”Intersektionalitet och historievetenskap” in *Scandia* 76:1 (2010).

The combination of the categories constituted an entirely new position.⁴ The benefit of the analytical concept of intersectionality for an investigation of the concept of manliness is that it directly points to the intersections of different categories, where gender mingles with age, class or ethnicity in a way that forms the view of certain groups.

It is also important to see what it means that the word manly was used in contexts not directly related to gender. The fact that manly was another word for human or mature indicates that the man was considered the norm for humanity. On the other hand manliness seems not to have been as strongly connected to the male body as it has been in later times. Women could sometimes be called manly in the positive sense of being mature and capable. The historian of ideas Maja Bondestam has also shown how “the manly years” (de manliga åren) in Swedish could refer to the fertile years of men as well as women. This could have meant a less rigid distinction between the sexes and a view of men and women as more alike.⁵ This understanding of the pre-modern gender relations as different from that of modern ones is connected to the one sex-model proposed by Thomas Laqueur. In this model man and woman are seen as being in different hierarchical positions on the same scale in a continuum, as opposed to the later two sex-model with the sexes as two completely different categories.⁶

THOMAS THORILD AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MANLY GENIUS

In my PhD project I investigate the construction of the concepts of genius and manliness in the writings of Thomas Thorild. Thorild was engaged in a fight concerning different literary ideals, where he advocated the genius’s right to express himself freely and not follow the French classicist poetic rules that were dominant at the time. In this context he frequently uses the notion of manliness as an opposition to childishness and youthfulness, in the sense of lacking strength, independence and reason. Dependence and weakness are in that way characteristics of childhood and youth, which was not necessarily connected to biological age. The people Thorild refers to as children are older, established poets connected to the court of King Gustav III. He views these poets as aristocratic and subservient to the king and the higher powers of society – and despotic against ordinary citizens. The talk of despotism and slavery is a reoccurring theme in the writings of Thorild.

His main opponent in the literary fight was the poet Johan Henric Kellgren, who also was one of the publishers of the newspaper Stockholms Posten, where some of their dialogue took place. Thorild also published his own newspaper “The new reviewer” (Den nye granskaren), during a few months in 1784, where the term manliness is used in connection to the maturity and integrity of the genius and the true citizen:

Alas! the manly enlightenment will come. It radiates from the great Geniuses. Meet it.
Feel Value and Truth. That ye may reach the honour and strength of a Man, and the
World at least in part shall cease to be a great Nursery.⁷

Thorild is referring to the enlightenment of the people as the growing up and maturing of the nation and of mankind. Knowledge and virtuous feeling are seen as requirements for the kind

⁴ Tolvhed, Helena, ”Intersektionalitet och historievetenskap” in Scandia 76:1 (2010), pp. 59–61.

⁵ Maja Bondestam. ”Revolutionens tid: När svenska gick in i puberteten” in In på bara huden: Medicinhistoriska studier tillägnade Karin Johannisson (Nora 2010), pp. 15, 21.

⁶ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge & London 1990), p. 8 ff.

⁷ Thorild, Thomas, *Samlade skrifter*. 2, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1934) (Den nye granskaren), (Original text: ”Ach! den manliga uplysningen kommer. Den utstrålar från de stora Snillen. Möten den. Kännen Värde och Sanning. At I måtten hinna äran och styrkan af en Man; och Verlden åtminstone til en del upphöra att vara en stor Barnkammare.”, translation by the author), p. 5.

of integrity that is needed in a true citizen with political influence. The citizen had to be manly and not a dependent and weak child. Thorild's use of the concept of genius also has a political dimension. The great manly genius is seen as a leader, not only in literature but also in politics and religion. He is a higher form of the enlightened citizen, who is characterized by reason, integrity, virtue and a higher capacity for feeling.

The image of the genius is contrasted by counter images of noblemen, children, youths, savages, the mob, fools, lunatics and animals. Thorild is most of the time referring to men, but sometimes feminine images are used to depict men or phenomena in the society. The court poets could be pictured metaphorically as either seductive whores or stupid and conceited misses. The unmanliness that Thorild refers to is also associated with ethnicity. He calls the reviewing that Kellgren conducts in his paper barbarian and wild and compares him and his likes with Hottentots, Tartars, Iroquois Indians and other exotic people, who are considered raw, angry and foolish. They are made childlike by the use of the word small, as when Kellgren is called a "little lively Kalmuck"⁸ with a "small-Tartarian empire".⁹ Another group that is thought of as raw is the mob of people from lower classes. The mob and the barbarians are both seen as left on a lower stage in the civilization process. Thorild talks of "the dirt of the Mob and the barbarism, from which we, in the light of nobler geniuses, have arisen"¹⁰. "Did not all Peoples love these angry, wild and rough pleasures, when they still were barbarians? Is not, still today, everything Hottentottish farcical?"¹¹ The development of reason is described as a maturing of the mind to reach the goal of manhood and manliness. The period of youth is referred to as wild in the same way as the savages and the mob:

the rising of the SENSE of the deadly, in its first infancy already beautiful, in its childhood vividly prattling, in its youth still half-wild and roving, but in all these different shapes, in all these degrees of the eternal Order, on its way towards the strength and beauty of Manliness.¹²

Thorild's use of metaphors results in a mixing of the traits of the different counter images, so that all groups associated with them get the same characteristics. These are traits not suited for citizenship and leadership, such as weakness, dependence, stupidity, insensitivity and brutality. Metaphors and analogies can be said to be interactive and constitutive of meaning. Since the two parts of a metaphor or analogy are active in the mind at the same time, they tend to interact with each other and create new meaning.¹³ Looking at the interactive metaphors is a way of investigating how the intersectional intertwinings work in my material. As shown by Nancy Leys Stepan the subordination of different groups tend to be reinforced when they are compared to each other by analogies. Stepan exemplifies with the analogy

⁸ Thorild, Thomas, *En critik öfver critiker*, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1990), (original text:"en liten liflig Calmuck", translation by the author), p. 83.

⁹ Thorild, Thomas, *En critik öfver critiker*, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1990), (original text:" sit småtartiska välide", translation by the author), p. 27.

¹⁰ Thorild, Thomas, *En critik öfver critiker*, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1990), (original text:"Pöbelns smuts och det barbari, hvarutur vi, i ädlare snillens ljus, upstigit", translation by the author), p. 90.

¹¹ Thorild, Thomas, *En critik öfver critiker*, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1990), (original text:"Älskade icke alla Folkslag dessa förbistrade, vilda och grofva nöjen, då de ännu voro barbarer? Är icke, än idag, alt Hottentottiskt farcicaliskt?", translation by the author), p. 90.

¹² Thorild, Thomas, *En critik öfver critiker*, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1990), (Original text:"de dödeligas upstigande VETT, i sin första spädhets redan vackert, i sin barndom lifligt jolrande, i sin ungdom ännu halfvildt och irrande, men i alla dessa olika skepnader, i alla dessa grader af den eviga Ordningen, på vägen til Manlighetens styrka och skönhet.", translation by the author), p. 64–65.

¹³ Black, Max, *Models and Metaphors: studies in language and philosophy* (Ithaca 1962), *Metaphor and Thought*, ed.: Andrew Ortony (Cambridge 1979), Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago & London 1980).

between race and gender in the 19th and 20th centuries. Since a discourse of racial difference already existed when attention was directed towards sex, the model of race difference was also used to explain sexual difference. The difference of black people and white women from white men was seen as being of a similar kind, which affected both groups negatively.¹⁴

THE LIKENESS OF WOMAN GENIUSES

Thorild's praising of manliness and the talk of the genius as manly did not prevent him from having an unusually high opinion of women when he writes about them explicitly. In "On the natural highness of the female sex" (*Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet*) published in 1793 he claims that there is a likeness between women and geniuses. Women are only weaker than men physically. They have in fact a higher strength that is closer to that of the angels, while the strength of ordinary men are instead closer to that of the wild animals:

But this Strength is God's, and the Genius's, and the Women's. And therefore Woman-Strength more resembles that of an Angel, whose nature we know is as much mightier than we, as it is higher: when Man-Strength resembles more that of a Wild animal, whose violence frightens and oppresses.¹⁵

Thorild also thinks that the character of men of sensibility and true geniuses resembles that of women. Genius is in that way associated with feeling, virtue and women. This relates to the findings of the gender researchers Christine Battersby and Anne K. Mellor, that characteristics considered feminine were appropriated by men prescribing to the idea of the romantic genius.¹⁶ In Thorild's view men becomes nobler by resembling women:

precisely to the degree that a man becomes ennobled, he resembles, in mildness of manners and character, a Woman, as you can see in all Men of soul and feeling (*hommes de Sentiment*), and vice versa that precisely to the degree a Woman becomes degenerated, she starts to, in all kinds of Immorality, resemble a Man; yes, if you look at the complete likeness in tenderness and liveliness that is between Women and all true Geniuses, that is, the high human beings that through their Reason or their Virtue are all people's Benefactors:¹⁷

He concludes that women, as they resemble the beneficial geniuses, should be assigned "the same natural highness over Men, that these have always thought themselves own over

¹⁴ Stepan, Nancy Leys, "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science" in Feminism & Science, ed.: Evelyn Fox Keller & Helen E. Longino (Oxford & New York 1996), p. 122 f.

¹⁵ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944), (*Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet*), (original text: "Men denna Styrka är Guds, och Snillet, och Qvinnornas. Hvarföre ock Qvinno-Styrkan liknar mera en Ängels, hvilket väsende man vet är så långt mägtigare än vi, som det är högre: då Karl-styrkan liknar mera ett Villdjurs, hvars våld förskräcker och nedslår", translation by the author), p. 356, (p. 14, original publication).

¹⁶ Battersby, Christine, Gender and Genius (1989), Mellor, Anne K., Romanticism & Gender (New York & London 1993)

¹⁷ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (*Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet*), (original text: "just i den mån som en karl förädlas, liknar han, i mildhet af seder och väsende, en Qvinna, såsom man ser hos alla Karlar af själ och känsla (*hommes de Sentiment*), och tvertom at just i den mån en Qvinna försämrar, börjar hon, i all slags Osed, likna en Karl; ja, då man ser den fullkomliga likhet i ömhet och liflighet som är imellan Qvinnor och alla sanna Snillen, det vill säga, de höga människor som genom sit Förstånd eller sin Dygd äro allas Välgörare:", translation by the author), pp. 356–357 (pp. 14–15, original publication).

Women. Thus the Order of Reason in the World must be arranged in this way: NATURE, Geniuses, WOMEN, Men, the Animals.”¹⁸

Thorild also acknowledges that women are viewed as children because of their lesser physical strength. He writes that men’s pride in regard to women “shows itself, when it is bad, in a kind of wild, and when it is good, in a kind of mild, Contempt: such as you feel for children, or for everything, whose weakness is far below your own highness.”¹⁹ He also confesses that he himself “felt that mild and flattering contempt, with a so altogether Turkish fancy, that I compared women to every other little voluptuous and shining Property: when a MAN on the other hand, meant for me a half-god or, in one thought, everything true and grand.”²⁰ This is a good description of the concept of manliness that is the opposite of childlessness. Women are seen as weak, subordinate and dependant on men and are in that way considered as children. In this text Thorild brings in the thinking of the two-sex model and views men and women as two different but equal categories. The man is then a person with a male body and not necessarily a person of maturity and perfection. Thorild is actually using the Swedish word “karl” instead of “man”, except when he is talking about great men. The word “manlig”, the equivalent of manly, is not used in this text.

Thorild claims that he, by using his reason, has realised that women first of all are human beings and should not be considered as females in the first place. In that way he finds them entitled to all the rights that belong to humans according to the enlightenment thinking. He also thinks that women should be seen as citizens with all the rights that belong to a citizen. Women should be thought of first as creatures of reason, then as human beings, then as citizens, friends, housewives and in the last place as lovers or wives.²¹ This is a reversal of the way he sees that women are usually viewed.

The counter images of the genius in this text are the wild animals and the unrefined and uncivilized men, who only respect violence and physical power. Thorild says that the woman-strength has not managed to affect men more than what men have managed to affect animals in regard to tenderness and highness: “that is, not much more, than the extent of art and Sweetness, of genius and taste, to which they themselves have brought the Parrot, the Ape and the Bear.”²² Men are less refined than women in the same way as animals are less refined than men, and have only been superficially improved. The wildness is not only associated with animals, but also with other people from foreign countries. The Turks symbolise the barbarian view of women as slaves. Thorild talks of “Skirt-slavery” (*Kjortelträldom*) and “Trouser-

¹⁸ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), (original text: ”Så är det omöjligt att icke tillägga QVINNORNA just denna samma naturliga höghet över Karlarne, som desse altid tilltrodt sig äga över Qvinnorna. Hvarigenom Förståndets Ordnning i Verlden måste upprättas på detta sätt: NATUREN, Snillen, QVINNOR, Karlar, Djuren.”, translation by the author), p. 357 (p. 15 original publication).

¹⁹ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3., ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), (original text: ”visar sig, när det är illa, i et slags vildt, och när det är väl, i et slags mildt, Förakt: sådant som man känner för barn, och för alt der, hvars svaghet är alför långt inunder ens höghet.”, translation by the author), p. 349 (p. 3, original publication).

²⁰ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), (original text: ”kände detta milda och smikrande förakt, med en så aldeles turisk inbildning, att jag jemförde qvinnorna med hvar och en annan liten vällustig och lysande Egendom: då deremot en MAN betydde för mig en halfgud, eller, i en enda tanke, alt sannt och stort.” translation by the author), p. 349 (p. 3–4, original publication).

²¹ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), p. 350–351, (p. 6, original publication).

²² Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), (”original text: ”det är, icke stort mera, än det af konst och Söthet, af snille och smak, hvartil de sjelfve bragt Papegojan, Apan och Björnen.”, translation by the author), p. 356 (p. 14, original publication).

majesty” (*Byx-majestät*) and concludes that all tenderness, nobleness, truth and genius have been kept in the same slavery as women.²³ He also says that men are each other’s slaves as well. But everything of Strength and Grandness that is oppressed may one day rise to make the world a better place. “People of genius and enlightenment, good Men and Patriots, the working Crowd, the Nations themselves”²⁴ will rise against the oppression of the barbarian tyrants.

CONCLUSION

Thorild frequently uses the word manliness in the debate about genius. But although he speaks of the genius as manly he also values women and sees a similarity between geniuses and women. To understand this view of the manliness and womanliness of the genius I have investigated the meaning of the concept of manliness that Thorild uses. Using intersectional theory I have looked at the intertwining of different categorisations in the notion of manliness and in the counter images of the genius. I have found that manliness most of the time meant maturity and independence and was used in opposition to childishness and juvenility. Manliness is not primarily a matter of gender in this context and is not contrasted to femininity as is usually the case today.

On the other hand women and children were seen as resembling each other in their subordinate positions. All subordinate groups were viewed as children in the sense of being dependent and in that sense weak. By the associations involved in the interactive metaphors they all get the same characteristics. Women, children, noblemen, people from lower classes and other ethnicities were all considered alike.

Another discourse that mingles with that of age is the one about the difference between man and animal. In Thorild’s view women are seen as standing further from the wild animals than men. In that way the tenderness and feeling associated with women is valued and is also seen as a characteristic of the genius. The counter images in this argumentation are the rawness and brutality of kings and noblemen considered as tyrants and of lower classes and other ethnicities. By the use of metaphors the court poets are also referred to as children that are small tyrants.²⁵ If they are described as animals it is often small animals like chicken, yelping dogs or baby moles²⁶. The civilization process is viewed as maturing analogous with ageing.

The opposites of the genius are seen as too raw and insensitive or too soft and weak – sometimes both at the same time. This may be a way for Thorild to distinguish himself from other men as well as women. By accentuating the womanlike sensibility of the genius he distances himself from ordinary men. In order to be considered a mature man he also claims that the genius has a manly strength. He has a combination of the characteristics attributed to men and women. The common denominator of the counter images is their lack of the strong and virtuous feeling of the genius. Even though femininity is valued and women are theoretically considered equal, the citizen and the genius in Thorild’s writings are usually

²³ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), p. 350 (p. 4–5, original publication)

²⁴ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 3, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1944) (Om qvinnokönets naturliga höghet), (original text: ”Folk af snille och uplysning, gode Män och Patrioter, arbetande Hopen, sjelfva Nationerna”, translation by the author), p. 355 (p. 12, original publication).

²⁵ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 2, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholm 1934) (Den Nye Granskaren), p. 6; En Critik öfver critiker, ed. Stellan Arvidson. p. 27, 105.

²⁶ Thorild, Thomas, Samlade skrifter 2, ed.: Stellan Arvidson (Stockholms 1934) (Den Nye Granskaren), p. 33; Samlade skrifter 1, ed.: Stellan Arvidson Stockholm 1933), (Fragment af 1783 års Vitterhet), p. 107.

thought of as white, bourgeois males in accordance with the discourse at the time. In the words of Battersby “a man with genius was like a woman ... but was not a woman”.²⁷

I have in this paper looked at the various meanings of the concept of manliness in the writings of the Swedish poet, writer and philosopher Thomas Thorild. This ambiguity of the concept of manliness in the past is one of the most interesting findings in the history of masculinity and I think it is worth further investigation.

²⁷ Battersby, Christine, *Gender and Genius* (1989), p. 8.