

## Chapter 9: Reclaiming the symbols

are problematic and fraught. This has always been true, but it becomes particularly explicit in periods when issues of gender are a matter of public debate. As various writers have pointed out, the period around the end of the nineteenth century has many similarities with our own time, and much of the rhetoric of that time is echoed in today's discourse. Indeed, it is surprising how familiar the current backlash against feminism sounds. But I have argued that certain strands of feminism have failed to appreciate the extraordinary power of that anxiety, and the need to understand this and challenge it if any real change is to be made.

What characterises all forms of feminism is the challenge of authentic self-definition. Whatever the theoretical stance, and whatever the beliefs held about the nature, origin or importance of sex difference, the agenda is to claim an authentic voice for women in their own destiny. Not only an authentic voice, but an authentic view: to perceive the world through women's eyes rather than holding a mirror up to men; to see the self as one experiences it rather than as it is experienced through men's perceptions. If there are 'mysteries' of the female, then let these be mysteries that women recognise and define, not those that men describe and endlessly strive to 'uncover' – and, through uncovering, control. The idea of the 'authentic voice' is more than the 'right to be heard' – to take part in the discussion, or to sit at the policy table. These are rights of access to power within the system. Real authenticity comes from saying, 'This is not how things are; this is not how I experience them' – and providing a new perspective.

This goal has been conceived in several ways. For some people, the goal of feminism has been equity, overcoming discrimination. If one believes that inequality and discrimination are founded upon mistaken theories about gender difference, the strategy for achieving the goal is to challenge those beliefs, to generate counter-evidence. Mostly, this has led to a concerted attack on lay and scientific misconceptions and distortions about the nature and extent of sex difference, emphasis on the social and economic conditions which create discrimination, and analysis of why the perpetuation of discrimination serves cultural needs. If the locus of concern is social context, individual psychological dynamics (such as anxiety about the boundaries of gender roles) are seen as the product of social and economic forces. Equality would be achieved by changing the underlying social and economic conditions. Behind such a conception is a fundamental belief in the possibility of rational change, and the eventual implementation of rational justice. In principle, justice should not depend on the absence of differences between groups; equal treatment can be accorded on the basis of citizenship alone. But in practice a great deal of the discussion about discrimination has hung on perceptions of difference, and of lesser

The message of this book has been that real changes occur only when there is a profound change in the underlying metaphors of gender. Beliefs about the nature of sex difference map on to much more extensive beliefs that are framed by metaphors of dualism. Where we identify something as masculine or feminine, we are not only talking about the affinities between that phenomenon and our images of gender-linked characteristics, we are assigning to it the *metaphor* of masculinity versus femininity. We see in that phenomenon all the interrelationships between its parts that we ascribe to the interrelation of the masculine and the feminine. Therefore, to change the metaphors of masculinity and femininity as we apply them to stereotypes of human behaviour and attributes, we have also to challenge the principles of dualism on which so much of our thinking rests. But that dualism itself, and the mapping of it on to gender, does not reflect only mental organisation, convenient frameworks for categorising the world; it also reflects profound anxieties. We construct 'either-or' categories not just for convenience, but because by defining one pole as the negation of the other, we assert not only what it is, but what it is *not*. The world is in balance because by asserting, or supporting, or endorsing, A we are denying, or suppressing, or devaluing B. Yet we also define A *in terms of* B; without the negation of B, A does not have the same force. Innocent has meaning precisely because it is not guilt. Hardness has no real significance unless we see it as negating softness.

This is not only conceptual usefulness. We have seen in earlier chapters that those areas on to which the masculinity-femininity polarity is mapped are often areas of anxiety and uncertainty. This merely reinforces the obvious point that masculinity and femininity themselves

worth or relevant talents. One should not have to believe that people are the same in order to treat them equally, but in effect this has been the case.

For this reason, the process of reconstructing gender and arriving at greater authenticity (for both men and women) within this model has emphasised the equal talents of men and women. A great deal of work, especially in psychology and anthropology, has been directed to undermining the myths of difference, demonstrating the biases in the research in many fields which have perpetuated difference. The effect has been to narrow down the areas in which there are established differences; one outcome has been discovery of differences which were not evident before. In other words, in the past science and social science largely confirmed conventional prejudice about gender; later work has undermined the stereotype and clarified the reality.

The important message of the rationalist search for authenticity is that differences are few. If they are not created by environmental factors, they are certainly exaggerated by them. They can be explained in terms of the social forces and economic conditions to which they serve a useful function – and they are amenable to modification. These are partly strategic positions, based on the premiss that inequality of treatment, whether justified or not, will continue unless there is a major cultural change in common beliefs about sex difference. The message that differences between the sexes are minimal is seen as the most effective *anti-logos* to the present orthodoxy.

A plea for *androgyny* emerged from this position. Stereotypes not only deprive people of opportunity and reward by virtue of their sex, but also constrain them as human beings. There are two versions of *androgyny*. One is that real differences between people are based on personality traits rather than gender, and there is enormous overlap of traits between the sexes. Gender plays a minor part in individual variation, though labelling may distort the way people are perceived. The concepts of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are largely irrelevant. A second version of *androgyny* is exemplified by the work of Sandra Bem, and of Janet Taylor Spence and Robert Helmreich, though it also echoes some popularisations of Jung. 'Masculinity' and 'femininity' are recognised. In Bem's work they reflect exactly nurturance versus agency. But the 'healthy individual' has a balance of both these characteristics. So *androgyny* is possession of both, rather than the denial of either.

Both versions of the *androgyny* model challenge a *logos* which is propped up by apparently 'scientific' evidence for sex difference. Using scientific evidence to counter this *logos* is a rational move. The rhetoric of 'rationality' is a useful strategy in a public discourse where this is the dominant and accepted mode. The argument for minimal difference has been quite effective in creating an ethos of anti-discrimination, and

in changing policy and legislation in many countries. However, this supposed rationality is in fact underpinned by profound anxieties about gender roles and sexuality. It also flies in the face of some subjective experience which, even if it is only a consequence of social construction and social conditioning, is nevertheless a profound part of ordinary personal identity. Rational arguments for *androgyny* fail to take account of the power of gender metaphors across most areas of life, culture and thought. Nor do they begin to tackle the emotional and defensive functions which masculinity and femininity serve.

Nor does the strategy of minimal difference take account of the possibility of distinctive female (and male) experience. The battle to 'own' one's perceptions of one's body, and of the peculiarly female experiences of menstruation, childbirth and the physical changes of illness and maturation, was first fought in the context of the medicalisation of women's experience. Medical expertise controlled not only the transition through these events, but their symbolic meaning.<sup>1</sup> This battle continues and remains lively, partly because it affects all women, irrespective of their social position or beliefs. Scandalous examples are still occurring.<sup>2</sup>

Here, authenticity would mean recognising the validity of women's experience and women's interpretation. This is not overtly feminist; women have always recognised areas of separate knowledge and awareness, and have excluded men either explicitly or by the tacit charge of 'not understanding'.<sup>3</sup> The issue for feminists has been the culture's treatment of this exclusion. 'Women's worlds' or 'women's ways of knowing' are at least marginalised and at worst denigrated. The Otherness of woman is *reinforced* by recognition of her special knowledge or her special understanding. It increases her alienation from the 'masculine'; confirms the difference between the masculine and the feminine, and the impossibility of bridging it. This feeds anxieties about maintaining rationality and control – which are closely tied to certain definitions of masculinity. Women's 'other' ways of knowing, or women's 'special' world of experience, become a threat because they appear inaccessible to the male. The frequent metaphors of 'uncovering', 'disclosing' and 'penetrating' the mysteries of the female psyche – and the female body – are expressions of this male unease.

The darker side of this is the anxiety that underlies Otherness. The problem is not that men deny women's experience, it is how this experience is dealt with in order to reduce its threat to the masculine world. Claiming authenticity requires that the Other be a valid alternative, to coexist with masculine experience, rather than 'alien to, a threat to, the antithesis of'. This task requires demystifying female Otherness – women are not such secret and bewildering creatures about whom nothing can be truly known. There needs to be recognition of

complexity, but a complexity defined through women's own authentic appreciation. At the end of the last century, the female poet George Egerton 'vowed to reveal the terra incognita of the female psyche, to "unlock a closed door with a key of my own fashioning"'.<sup>4</sup> This is the message of both cultural and radical feminism, whether at the hands of Carol Gilligan, the French school of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, or the radical feminist Mary Daly.

'The key of my own fashioning', or Gilligan's 'different voice', represent a female perspective rooted in shared female experience. It does not necessarily assume that all women experience everything in the same way, only that it is legitimate to claim a valid voice, to challenge the masculine perspective which casts the feminine as alien and antithetical. This, at the very least, gives women the right to a privileged interpretation of their own lives. Indeed, feminine discourse about female experience has always flourished, privately and amongst women. But it is not enough to give women privilege with regard to their own experience, or even the right to an alternative perspective on the world at large. *The real challenge is to an orthodoxy that there is only one way of interpreting the world, only one model of reasoning.* The challenge is a plea for a pluralistic perspective; it has implications for all domains of knowledge. It is not the replacement of a masculine perspective with a feminine one, but the implication that if there is more than one valid alternative perspective, a monolithic or absolutist position is untenable.

Why is this different from the androgyny ideal? Androgyny denies the force of metaphors of gender by presuming that the tensions can be overcome by a rational challenge. If one takes seriously the argument that there is a hidden perspective to be brought out, to coexist with the dominant current perspective, then one has to understand the forces and anxieties which have cast that alternative as 'hidden'. To do this it is necessary to reconstruct the previous dichotomies. So it is not enough to say that women have the same kind and degree of rationality as men. Nor, even, is it enough to say that they have a special kind of knowledge that we call 'intuition'. Instead, the message is that knowing requires both 'rationality' and intuition. Saying this undermines the dualistic metaphor, the antithesis of logic versus intuition.

In her provocative book *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia distinguishes between the 'Apollonian' and the 'Dionysian' modes, contrasting and conflicting streams within Western culture.<sup>5</sup> She sees the Apollonian mode as the triumph of reason in the struggle against the chaos of nature and the Dionysian. To achieve the changes for which I am arguing, we must not only redefine both the attributes of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, but we must also stop thinking of them in terms of a desperate struggle. To do this, we must recognise that

there is something to be redefined, not merely denied. Masculinity and femininity are mapped on to these grand dualities because they serve important metaphorical purposes, but the concepts of masculinity and femininity themselves are trapped by just those metaphors on to which they are mapped. They need to be challenged and redefined. This is a very profound challenge to our present concepts of culture and civilisation, because the current metaphors both create anxieties and resolve them.

'Authenticity' in this context, therefore, means two things. It means deconstructing and reconstructing the various metaphors of the relationship between masculine and feminine, both symbolically as mapped on to other metaphors of dualism and, specifically, with regard to male-female relations. And it means finding new and more authentic conceptions of masculinity and femininity as human characteristics. In the last two decades, moves towards such authenticity have been made through the attack on symbols. Consider the problem: we have inherited at least two thousand years of metaphors of gender. These include actual beliefs about and 'scientific' justifications of sex difference, but they also include an enormous system of metaphors and symbols, covering everything from cosmology to the electric plug, on to which the duality of masculine and feminine has been grafted and become an inherent part of the meaning. In some of these areas (like the electric plug) this is little more than a simple physical analogy. In others (like the dichotomy of rationality versus chaos) a vast edifice has been constructed, a complex theory of control and mastery.

Such edifices are enshrined in the dominant ethos of the culture, which, on the whole, is the ethos that is explicit in the main cultural institutions – religion, literature, art and the mainstream media. Conceptions of what constitutes science, medicine, and education are distilled through it. This culture has numerically been dominated by men, particularly men of learning who were well trained in the subtleties of theory construction and rationalisation. It has further been dominated by the preoccupations of the male psyche, the anxieties surrounding masculine experience, male biological cycles and the crises of male life.

Yet this is not entirely a monolithic history. The voice of woman, and the voice of the feminine, has not been wholly absent from the construction of culture. Woman's role has not only been as a fantasy figure of threat or of private succour to men. Furthermore, there have been many diverse strands within male culture, and successive waves of very different, and competing, belief systems. Even though each wave may be replaced by another, these alternatives do not die out; they remain hidden or low-profile, or confined to non-powerful groups. Therefore, in reconstructing metaphors, there is a vast resource of these

other cultural strands to draw upon. Such mining of hidden culture has been a favourite occupation of reformers and reconstructors.

### *Strategies for change*

There are a number of possible strategies for change. Existing schemas and models can be challenged and proved untenable – either because they are based on inaccurate data, or because they are no longer necessary as defences against anxiety. One example is the way scientific evidence has been used to challenge former science-backed beliefs about sex difference. A more practical example can be drawn from campaigns for birth control – equating masculinity with the siring of numerous sons is still a problem in many cultures. This can become less important if there are alternative symbols of masculinity (the level of success achieved by those sons) or if one of the justifications for large families, provision for old age, is removed by welfare systems. In these cases, 'masculinity' is not challenged, only its manifestations. Both these examples are ostensibly about appeals to logic and reason, but in fact they work because the old symbol is replaced with a new one and the anxiety is defused.

A second strategy is to redefine the meaning or significance of the symbol or metaphor. This is being done to some extent to concepts like 'mastery' and 'control' – not only through feminist thought, but particularly in the Green Movement. The equation of control metaphors with assault upon the environment, and attempts to replace the metaphor of mastery with the metaphor of harmony and holism, are far wider than the explicit debate about gender, yet the metaphor of mastery is deeply implicit in masculinity.

Frequently redefinition comes serendipitously out of research itself, but needs overt acknowledgement of its implications. Herman Witkin, a cognitive psychologist, found sex differences in ability to focus on one stimulus and exclude the context.<sup>6</sup> The task was to find figures (such as geometric shapes) embedded in a confusing background. Those described by Witkin as 'field dependent' took longer to find the shapes than those who were described as 'field independent'. There are significant rhetorical implications attached to the words 'independent' and 'dependent'; they resonate with the American ethos of individualism and masculine no-nonsense getting to the point. Witkin found that males were more likely to be field independent, and females, field dependent. But when the research team later looked in greater detail at just how respondents scanned the pictures, it emerged that field-dependent people were systematic, taking into

account the whole picture before arriving at their conclusions; whereas the field-independent respondents zoomed in on the target.<sup>7</sup> If they were successful, they solved the problem fast, but if they failed to spot it quickly, they had much greater difficulty in finding alternative strategies. The original interpretation was that women (and field-dependent people) have difficulty in focusing on one singular problem. An alternative conclusion is that men (and field-independent people) can focus on only one aspect of the problem, and have difficulty in taking into account other things that might be important. Some tasks need 'field independence'; others need 'field dependence'.

There is another, real-life example of the need for different strategies for perceptual tasks. During the Second World War, scientists of various kinds were drafted to interpret aerial photographs. In a discussion of the relative merits of what he termed the 'hard' and 'woolly' sciences, Beverly Halstead wrote:

This was a task for which mathematicians, physicists and chemists had no aptitude, whereas geologists, botanists and zoologists excelled at it. They were trained to view the whole scene and their eyes were trained to spot changes, minor inconsistencies in pattern. It is the ability to take on board a vast array of seemingly unrelated data and then grasp connections, usually missed by the exact sciences, that gives the woolly sciences their great vitality.<sup>8</sup>

The dichotomy of hard versus woolly science was a deliberate challenge to the assumption that there is only one 'correct' method in science. Halstead's challenge parallels the masculine-feminine distinction. In these examples the value of the poles is inverted, but this does not profoundly challenge the polarity itself; the feminine, and the woolly, become as valued as the masculine and the hard, but the meaning of the metaphor remains the same.

Redefining and reclaiming metaphors includes *mining the hidden traditions* – and again, inverting their evaluation. Some radical feminists have embraced the traditions of witchcraft, have turned into positive terminology the traditional negative epithets 'hag' and 'crone'.<sup>9</sup> The search for a lost matriarchy of the past proved ill-conceived for a variety of reasons, but it drew attention to the hidden role of women in many political systems. More significantly, it has drawn attention to the powerful metaphor of the Earth Mother in her many forms, both good and destructive, and alerted us to the deep anxiety about femininity which explains some of the defensive aspects of masculinity. In the mythological image of a benign and powerful Earth Mother, the reasons for male fears become rather more obvious.

Matriarchies may be myth, but religions which are 'earth'- as opposed to 'sky'-based either accord power to the female principle

or, more often, require both male and female principles to function in balance, to maintain harmony with the forces of nature. This tends to remove the metaphor of struggle between masculine and feminine which is such a profound element of sky-god cultures. Marion Bradley's novel *Mists of Avalon* is a fictional treatment of this. The Arthurian legend is recast as the early history of conflict between the Roman influence that brought the male religion of Christianity, and the traditional Celtic faith of the Earth Mother and the Horned God.<sup>10</sup> Other Westerners have turned to the mythologies of Hinduism or the American Indians, looking for ways of building a cosmology around a different version of masculine-feminine relations. In a controversial search for a new definition of masculinity, Robert Bly, author of *Iron John*, has turned to Teutonic fairy tales.<sup>11</sup>

Reclaiming the organic metaphor as a counter to the mechanistic is a central part of Green thinking, finding its expression perhaps most fully and lucidly in the Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock.<sup>12</sup> The rejection of a mechanistic model of science and technology as control and mastery is about much more than being nice to the environment. It is a challenge to the whole relationship between the human being and the object of investigation, replacing a relationship of separated objectivity with participant observation. The Gaia hypothesis also argues that a model of evolution based upon successful development of competitive attributes may be wrong; instead, cooperation may be the characteristic mode of successful adaptation. This is hardly new; Petr Kropotkin proposed a cooperative model of evolution in 1902.<sup>13</sup> It is not only the idea that is interesting, but the context out of which it arose, and this context is a particularly good example of the role of culture in the generation and acceptance of metaphors that influenced scientific thinking. For Western Europeans, Malthus's spectre of disastrous overpopulation, which led Darwin to the concept of natural selection, resonated with their experience of an overcrowded and increasingly industrialised world. Marx wrote to Engels in 1862: 'It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among beasts and plants his English society, with its divisions of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'invention' and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence'.'<sup>14</sup>

But for Russians like Kropotkin, the world was large and empty. As Halstead argued:

The struggle for existence, the idea of competition, the very idea of population pressure were seen as evidence of the inseparability of science and cultural values and related to the experience of English schoolboys brought up on competitive sports. Darwinism was seen by Russian scientists in particular as a purely English doctrine expressing

the English preoccupation with practicality and competition. The sparsely populated Russian Empire with its enormous wealth of natural resources, made it virtually impossible for Russian scientists to grasp the notion of overpopulation with its consequent pressures on natural resources. Such ideas seemed fanciful and flew in the face of the Russian scientists' own experience. Other aspects of Russian life such as a preference for group activities led to the theory of mutual aid as a key factor in the process of evolution.<sup>15</sup>

There is a fine line between rediscovery and innovation. In claiming or reclaiming ancient metaphors and symbols of relationship, feminists and Green thinkers alike are self-consciously challenging the dominant metaphors of the culture. But they are not just returning to an earlier, or hidden, mode. Challenging a metaphor with its antithesis, or with a new metaphor, undermines its meaning. When the women at Greenham Common weave webs on the wire, or use flowers and toys as symbols of protest, they are affirming feminine symbols to challenge the masculine hierarchy expressed in the power metaphors of war, but they are also offering an alternative way of looking at the world. In the search for new definitions of masculinity and femininity, therefore, the first task is to challenge received wisdom, received symbols and the metaphors which explain and justify the traditional patterns. This exercise reveals just how extensive and profound are the anxieties underpinning our conceptions of gender.

### *Fear and the limits of rationalist change*

Let us postulate for the moment that there do exist the sort of people, and the sort of cultural tradition, in which the ideals of a truly post-feminist, rational-androgynous world are possible. Such people have been raised without strong sanctions against sex-inappropriate behaviour, they have never learnt to worry about failing in their masculinity or femininity, and they have acquired a rounded view of the human person which acknowledges the coexistence of masculinity and femininity within every balanced individual. The ideal model of sexual relationships is the merging of essentially similar selves who have equal power in a relationship. Discrimination against people on the grounds of sex would be anathema, and furthermore, because work and family life (and all their ramifications) have equivalent importance, the necessary accommodations to family responsibilities are made, rather than being seen as a handicap to full efficiency in the work context. Such people, and such a world, are the goal of much writing within the socialist and liberal feminist tradition – for example, that of Lynne Segal and Ann Oakley.

It is a world which some people even do inhabit, cushioned by education and the right professional situation. It is a world that is represented as attainable once two things have been achieved: changing the social and economic conditions that emphasise work, marginalise family life and discriminate against women in terms of both economic rewards and a voice in policy-making, and changing the attitudes which equate masculinity (and maleness) with power – over women, over subordinates and between men.

However, as soon as this rationalist goal became public currency, it was clear that most people had not grown up free of anxieties about gender, and that these anxieties would not be assuaged by economic change. Furthermore, it became explicit that there was a common belief that many aspects of culture and civilisation depended upon a struggle between the forces of rationality and the forces of chaos. The darker side of human passion, whether general emotion that disorganised the intellect, or specifically overwhelming and destructive forces like sex and aggression, constantly lurked below the surface, and was potentially more powerful than the forces of reason. To defend against this requires constant control and vigilance.

This is a direct mapping on to the internal life of human beings, of the metaphor of Man trying to control the powers and chaos of Nature. It is indeed the world that Freud describes, but it is also the world of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the sky-god (equated with intellect) who battles against the dark forces of the earth, in the form of the flesh. Camille Paglia uncompromisingly states that 'Sex is daimonism' and that 'Western love . . . is a defense mechanism rationalising forces ungoverned and ungovernable. Like early religion it is a device enabling us to control our primal fear. Sex cannot be understood because nature cannot be understood.'<sup>16</sup> The dualism she describes – and to which she subscribes – is Apollonian reason in conflict with the Dionysian appeals of nature and the flesh. For her, as for others in this tradition, civilisation and progress in science and culture depend upon the triumph of the Apollonian over the Dionysian. There seems to be no space in her perspective for shifting between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, for *integration*. There is constant battle, yet the Apollonian can never fully win.

Paglia's thesis about culture rests upon the assumption that men fear the female and the feminine, the cyclic and the natural, and are constantly trying to escape both the feminine and the power of their mothers. It is through this struggle, and the symbolic phallic ejaculation and erection (and urination standing up, though she is wrong to believe this is universal<sup>17</sup>), that creativity and conceptualisation are possible: 'Male projection of erection and ejaculation is the paradigm for all cultural projection and conceptualisation.'<sup>18</sup> So culture is *necessarily* both

masculine and male-dominated, and women have access to it only in their 'Apollonian' mode, in which they are hampered by being closer to nature and to the Dionysian forces. For Paglia, women do not have an alternative culture but, by definition, no culture.

Paglia's position is uncompromising; indeed, one might say extreme. But it expresses a long tradition of profound anxiety experienced by individual men, and manifested in a cultural perspective associated with Catholic asceticism and, in a different form, Puritanism. The theory of conflict on which it rests reproduces anxieties in generations of people. Paglia is right, of course, when she argues that the kind of feminism that I describe as a rationalist ideal has taken absolutely no cognizance of these forces. She herself is using the metaphor of rationality versus chaos, and the mapping of male-female relations on to it – and she endorses it. Within this cultural tradition, the only way to change gender roles must be to challenge the whole basis of the model of rationality. Paglia accepts the model; I dispute it; but we share an appreciation of the same metaphors. Paglia presents a total picture, within which she explains decadence in art and literature. But elements of her world-view can be seen in less apocalyptic visions of society, which nevertheless feed the anxieties about gender that sustain many current metaphors. Many writers who do not share Paglia's gloom do acknowledge the widespread fear of the feminine and the belief that masculinity is equated with personal autonomy, even if it is not seen as a power.

Here we can return to the mythology of the Earth Mother. This is ambivalent; the enveloping, caring female force may be a haven into which one can sink, but it may also smother, devour or reject. For some reason this is seen as a major problem for men, but hardly considered in relation to women. The tension is expressed in the conflict between the pressure on little boys (and later men) to be tough, independent and self-sufficient, yet reliant on maternal approval and affection – especially in cultural contexts where adult males do not express warmth to their sons. In *Men in Love*, her book on male sexual fantasies, Nancy Friday concludes:

Inside every male is a denied little boy . . . . He loved his mother, but feared her power. The male principle in society says he is expected to be tough and domineering with women, always in control, and sexually voracious. The female principle is the opposite; when he approaches women, he carries with him all his unconscious memories of mother's awesome powers of retaliation and rejection.<sup>19</sup>

Friday argues that male fantasies are the means for men to create women as magic beings who do not possess this threatening power.

Such men might greet with relief a changing gender scenario in which



they do not have to be all-powerful, and can welcome women who will give them love and acceptance without overtones of mother-power. Again, in the ideal rationalist world there are people who have achieved this in their relationships and in their self-image, but the cultures which generate myths of Kali, Lilith, and Babi Yaga do not have such a rationalist basis. And while these are not the myths of Anglophone Western culture, nevertheless in this culture we see the flight from the feminine in a host of different ways: the ethos of manliness that requires rejection of the feminine in all its forms and, to achieve this, severs the ties between the little boy and his mother in order to toughen him – the symbolic as well as actual separation of the boy from that which is female – defines, by antithesis, that which is male. Power, strength, autonomy, rationality, control and self-assertion are equated with symbols of phallicism, erection and ejaculation, all of which are, by definition, denied to females.

In this model, the male gains his adult/male status through the rejection of everything symbolic and concrete about his ties to his mother. The fear is not explicitly, in this metaphor, that she will devour him, but that her femaleness will sap his masculinity, and therefore his strength, and therefore his identity as a person. He must escape from the feminine and all its metaphors. Paglia talks of 'slime' and 'swamp' – especially the oozings of the female body, which the male encounters again when he begins sexual life with women. Male 'oozings' are 'outside' the body by the time they are evident, and can be washed away quickly. Such oozings are both a concrete and a metaphoric contrast with the purity of the masculine. For men, but not for women, they can be confined to periods of infancy, illness and the eventual decrepitude of old age. The association of menstrual blood with taboos in many cultures, and particularly with the pollution of male figures in religious roles, reflects this metaphor. It is still true that advertisements for sanitary towels and tampons on television in Britain and the States can only be very coy about either the product or its purpose. Even as recently as January 1993 the British Advertising Standards Authority was besieged by – and conceded to – objections to the advertising of a sanitary towel on television.

The fear is of the feminine as sapper of masculinity, weakening and polluting through her very femaleness. Woman is mother who devours and smothers, preventing the separation that leads to strength and autonomy (and may be manifested in woman-as-wife who controls). Woman is a terrible powerful judge who may reject the boy in childhood; she is symbolic in every little girl who giggles with her friends, and may grow up to ridicule the adult male. To escape this, the male must find ways either to pretend that women's opinions are unimportant, or to exert power to suppress women.

Finally there is woman, and the female, as the representative of temptation away from the path of Apollonian purity and transcendence of nature and chaos. Woman tempts because she causes Man's thoughts to stray to the fleshly, the carnal, the natural, and away from cognitive control. Yet into this is also woven the Good Mother, Roger Scruton's ideal, who has the power to control the little boy's passion and to restrain his potentiality for chaos and destruction. So the female represents both the domain of chaos that masculinity can transcend through reason, and also at the same time, because she has less passion of her own, she can exert restraints upon the male. She is both Superego and Id, between which the frail male ego struggles to survive.

These scenarios seem to underlie the dualism of masculine and feminine in the culture we have inherited. They belong to different strands, but the individual within the culture has access to all the myths. Some will be more salient than others. Characteristic of all these myths is the idea of struggle and conflict between the feminine and the masculine. One is defined in terms of the Other, usually as a negation, but sometimes as a force which must be kept in a fine balance of control: enough feminine force to support and praise, or to act as a brake, but not enough to swamp uncertain and fragile masculinity.

So, many anxieties underlie the force of gender as a framework for meaning. The least emotionally problematic is simple cognitive categorisation, learnt early and confirmed through the individual's own use, and through constant cultural affirmation. En-gendering is the result of continual exposure to a dualistic category system which frames so many areas of thought. Threat comes when a boundary is challenged, and comfortable certainty is replaced by ambiguity. The emotional power of dualistic metaphors is greatly increased when they map on to gender. More anxiety-inducing are metaphors of gender that presuppose conflict between the masculine and the feminine, especially where the masculine is defined by a negation of, or escape from, the feminine. To remove the underlying anxiety which creates that categorisation requires not only a redefinition of the masculine but a different conceptualisation of the feminine, in balance rather than antithesis. But most difficult to deal with are conceptions of masculinity which arise out of a fear of being devoured or overwhelmed by female emotional power. The motivation is escape from that power, rather than denial of the feminine *per se*. Such metaphors of gender see the power of the female force, and deal with it by translating it into something Other and dangerous.

There is a difference between, on the one hand, fear of being overwhelmed by feminine power and, on the other, aligning masculine with reason in a confrontation with the threat of chaos and the feminine to one's identity. The former is a statement about external forces that

may smother or overwhelm me – without necessarily trying to change what I am. The latter is a statement about that-which-I-am versus that-which-I-am-not. Men may fear women having too much power over them through emotional ties, without that implying the fear of being feminised or weakened in their identity. The distinction is evident in different responses to the threats of changing gender roles. For those who fear female power, the power of women as persons/mothers to overwhelm, to change gender roles would give women power in areas which have hitherto been denied them, and extend their arena of emotional action. Here the idea of androgyny is threatening because it undermines little boys' strength to resist the power of women; it is general 'weakening'. But for those who hold an image of warring factions of reason and chaos, of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, androgyny is the dangerous leakage of the feminine, the polluting of the pure, the undermining of the good, which comes from confusing the boundaries.

It is tempting to claim that the threat of overwhelming female emotional power exists only in the fevered imagination of a few men. This is manifestly not true; for many women trapped in the traditional role of life lived through her male, emotional control, however limited, is the only strategy – the tyranny of the weak. The powerless woman, dependent financially and for social status upon men, had no alternative but to manipulate the Other role to her best advantage, to enhance those aspects of her personality and body which reassured male anxieties (by enhancing the feminine, by playing down the emotional power, by building up the male ego) and guaranteed her the only kind of security available in that culture. Within this model the success of the maternal role will be measured by the outcome, so the effort to praise the male child for masculine behaviour endorses those very strivings for 'manliness' which the male culture prizes – so reinforcing also the mother who both loves and rejects, reproducing just that very culture which is ambivalent about mothers. Early in the century, Ambrose Bierce, in his *Devil's Dictionary*, expressed this fear. He defined Weakness as 'Certain primal powers of Tyrant Woman wherewith she holds dominion over the male of her species, binding him to the service of her will and paralysing his rebellious energies'.<sup>20</sup>

It has been said that boys walk a constant knife-edge of failure, always pushing the limits of their skills and often failing as well as often succeeding, continually reinforcing their uncertainty. The vulnerability of the male ego – that very vulnerability which generates defensive masculinist strategies – is well recognised by women. Yet the traditional sex-role pattern reinforces that vulnerability by encouraging the young boy's 'dicing with failure', his testing the limits – the reward being approval from females. Little boys learn that females will provide the

necessary sympathy and praise for their behaviour; little girls learn to provide that sympathy and praise. So little girls learn to sustain their own egos through nurturing others, while little boys learn to be uncertain and constantly in need of proving themselves. The cycle continues thus.

## Notes

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2. I describe a case in Chapter 10.
3. See, for example, D. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and men in conversation*, New York: Morrow, 1990.
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18. Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 20.
19. N. Friday, *Men in Love: Men's sexual fantasies: the triumph of love over rage*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1980.
20. A. Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, New York: A. & C. Boni, 1926.