

Man Made Language

Women are aware that male superiority is a myth and they deal with this knowledge in numerous ways. Their response to 'enlightenment' may range from disillusionment to elation, from masking their feelings in an attempt to hide their disappointment and preserve the myth, to outrightly declaring their knowledge in an attempt to explode it.

But male superiority is not to be confused with male power: only one is a myth which can be exposed and eradicated by knowledge, by a change in consciousness. While they are different, however, they are also inextricably linked, for male superiority has served as a justification for male power. Any exposure of the false nature of male superiority, while not a direct assault on male power, is an indirect attack which undermines it. If and when sufficient members of society no longer give consensus to the myth of male superiority, if and when they no longer act in a manner which acquiesces in that superiority and permits it to go unchallenged, then, rather than being taken for granted, that power will need to be defended or transformed.

It is because males have had power that they have been in a position to construct the myth of male superiority and to have it accepted; because they have had power they have been able to 'arrange' the evidence so that it can be seen to substantiate the myth. The myth was made a long time ago and for centuries it has been fostered by women and men so that now it is deeply embedded in virtually every aspect of our existence. It is a myth which may be attacked but one which is not easy to eradicate, for all myths still have a hold over us long after they have been intellectually repudiated, and this one, which is fundamental to our social order, is particularly pervasive and particularly hard to dislodge. The fabric of our social organisation has been woven to support and substantiate it and nothing less than a restructuring of our beliefs and values is necessary, if it is to be laid to rest.

It appears to be part of the human condition to attempt to make existence meaningful but we can only make sense of the world if we have rules by which to do it. We need to know what information to select, how to piece it together, and what interpretation to impose upon it, and the rules which each culture evolves for making

sense of the world form the basis for these decisions. As we use these rules we confirm their validity, we make them 'come true'. Our results depend on the programme we begin with; as we pattern, select and interpret on the premise that males are superior - and of course, concomitantly, that females are inferior - we construct a view of the world in which males continue to be seen as superior, and females continue to be seen as inferior, thereby perpetuating the myth and reinforcing the justification for male power.

One of our fundamental rules for making sense of our male-dominated world is - predictably - that the male represents the positive while the female, necessarily then, represents the negative. On this foundation stone we have erected many of the structures which make male dominance seem reasonable and even 'natural' for our feedback is determined largely by what we feed in. It is this rule which must be changed if we are to construct a view of the world in which both sexes are accorded equal value. When we begin to select, pattern and interpret according to the rule that the sexes are equal, we will construct a very different reality, we will make very different ideas 'come true'. The claim for male superiority will no longer seem reasonable and the male monopoly in power will be seen as problematic.

Each day we construct the world we live in according to these man made rules. We select, pattern and interpret the flux of events in the attempt to make life meaningful and few of us suspect how deeply entrenched, and arbitrary, these rules are. We impose them on the world so that what we see conforms to what we have been led to see. And one of the crucial factors in our construction of this reality is *language*.

Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality. In its structure and in its use we bring our world into realisation, and if it is inherently inaccurate, then we are misled. If the rules which underlie our language system, our symbolic order, are invalid, then we are daily deceived.

Yet the rules for meaning, which are part of language, are not natural; they were not present in the world and merely awaiting discovery by human beings. On the contrary, they had to be invented before anything could be discovered, for without them there is

no frame of reference, no order, no possibility for systematic interpretation and understanding. Once made, however, these rules have a habit of becoming self-validating and self-perpetuating, regardless of any misapprehensions on which they may have initially been based. Although it is not possible to 'begin at the beginning' and to identify the forces which were at work in the construction of these rules to determine whether or not they were accurate or justified, it is possible to analyse the contemporary classification system of our language and to speculate on the origins, and the reasons for these rules, which now play such a vital role in the construction of our world view.

One semantic rule which we can see in operation in the language is that of the male-as-norm. At the outset it may appear to be a relatively innocuous rule for classifying the objects and events of the world, but closer examination exposes it as one of the most pervasive and pernicious rules that has been encoded. While this rule operates we are required to classify the world on the premise that the standard or normal human being is a male one and when there is but *one* standard, then those who are not of it are allocated to a category of deviation. Hence our fundamental classification scheme is one which divides humanity not into two equal parts (if two is to be the significant number) but into those who are plus male and those who are minus male. At the most basic level of meaning the status of the female is derived from the status of the male and on this has been erected many strata of positive and negative classifications.

Outside the way in which we order the world there is no compelling reason to classify people according to their genitalia, and even if there were, there would still be no compelling reason to classify them simply dichotomously, a division which we even find frequently inadequate, despite our mental set which helps to construe difference along sexually dimorphous lines. If we did feel obliged to use genitalia as a reference point for the classification of humanity, it would be just as reasonable to classify, for example, according to the degree of protection provided for sexual organs, in which case we would not be confined to a dichotomy but would have a continuum along which people could be placed, with some enjoying better protection than others.

But we do divide on the basis of genitalia; we do construct only *two* sexes; we do insist upon a whole range of gender determined behaviours. And we do all this for a purpose. By arranging the objects and events of the world according to these rules we set up the rationale, and the vindication, for male supremacy.

While at one level we may support or refute the myth of male superiority - it being a matter of political choice - at another level we are unaware of the way in which it structures our behaviour and forms some of the limits of our world. With the crucial underlying rule that the world can be divided into minus male or plus male categories we have seen the construction of *patriarchal order*.

[Patriarchy. There are numerous understandings of this term, both inside and outside feminism. With Mary Daly, I agree that 'patriarchy appears to be everywhere'.
Veronica Beechey:

The concept of patriarchy has been used within the women's movement to analyse the principles underlying women's oppression ... it has been used ... in the search for an explanation of feelings of oppression and subordination, and in the desire to transform feelings of rebellion into a political practice and theory ... Thus the theory of patriarchy attempts to penetrate beneath the particular experiences and manifestations of women's oppression and to formulate some coherent theory of the basis of subordination which underlies them.

But patriarchy is also a frame of reference, a particular way of classifying and organising the objects and events of the world; it is a form of 'order' which patterns our existence (Cora Kaplan, refers to it as 'patriarchal order'). I am using patriarchy in all of these senses; I am using it as an inclusive term to encompass a sex-class system, and a symbolic system which supports male supremacist social arrangements. That is why I see 'patriarchy everywhere'; there is no aspect of our lives, that I know of, which is outside patriarchy ... at the moment. But trying to 'pin down' the nature of this term from the beginning is self-defeating. Meanings are mapped out, layer on layer, and it is through the course of making many meanings, that specific meanings emerge.]

It is a symbolic order into which we are born and as we become members of society and begin to enter the meanings which the symbols represent, we also begin to

structure the world so that those symbols are seen to be applicable: we enter into the meaning of patriarchal order and we then help to give it substance, we help it to come true.

Some of us, however, have decided to stop. We no longer wish to give substance to patriarchal order and its integral component, the superiority of the male. We have started to formulate different rules for classifying the world, rules that are not based on the assumption that the proper human being is a male one and that female is a negative category. We have begun to codify the meaning that woman is an autonomous category and we are beginning to make this version of the world come true. We are gathering our own evidence which disproves male superiority and which unmasks the many mechanisms which have helped to sustain this unfortunate and inappropriate reality. Our task however is an enormous one; it is also one which flies in the face of conventional wisdom. We are accused of not behaving *reasonably* in the context of patriarchal order.

This is a perfectly understandable reaction, for when a society has developed a particular pattern for meaning, those who do not abide by it are being unreasonable - in its terms. But unless that pattern for meaning is infallible (and there is considerable evidence that it is not, given that meaning changes not just from one society to another, but within one society over time) then the flaw may be in the pattern itself, and not in those who protest. If patriarchal order can be shown to be unreasonable, then those who are attempting to dismantle it are behaving in an eminently reasonable fashion.

Being branded as unreasonable, however, is probably the least of our problems, even though it does serve to illustrate the way in which dissenters can be conveniently discounted. The crux of our difficulties lies in being able to identify and transform the rules which govern our behaviour and which bring patriarchal order into existence. Yet the tools we have for doing this are part of that patriarchal order. While we *can* modify, we must none the less use the only language, the only classification scheme which is at our disposal. We must use it in a way that is acceptable and meaningful.

But that very language and the conditions for its use in turn structure a patriarchal order.

Because of this it is imperative that we begin to unravel the many linguistic means by which patriarchy has been created. Not only do we have to tackle and transform the fundamental classification scheme, we also have to tackle its myriad manifestations. Every aspect of the language from its structure to the conditions of its use must be scrutinised if we are to detect both the blatant and the subtle means by which the edifice of male supremacy has been assembled. If we are to begin to take it apart we must be able to recognise its form.

Deconstructing patriarchal order is not tantamount to eliminating male power. There is a current feminist criticism which justly maintains that consciousness-raising does not remove males from the influential positions in society nor does it provide women with equitable wages. But there is a consensus which must accompany power and at the moment too many people are content to see male power and dominance as reasonable, and natural. Too many people make a contribution towards the realisation of this power. By making it increasingly difficult to justify male supremacy we also make it increasingly difficult to justify male power, and when that consensus is no longer available then it is not just the myth of male superiority which is at stake. When consensus is withdrawn there have been changes made in the construction of reality and they are not insignificant changes.

Although there have been many erroneous rules formulated for classifying the world, the ones in which I am primarily interested, in this context, are those which relate to the stratification of females and males. These are not the only hierarchical forms but they are the ones which I have chosen to concentrate on and explore. I have used the basic division of female/male, partly because I think it is a prototypic division, and I have indicated how and why we impose unequal value on these categories and with what adverse results.

If polarising female/male in this way leads to the *reasonable* conclusion, within the patriarchal order, that this case is anti-male, then so be it. I am “*anti*” the categories of

plus male and minus male. But if those categories are abolished and males are no longer presented as superior, I will accept them as my equals. That, however, will not be within a patriarchal order.