

Real Men Don't: Anti-Male Bias in English

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In this recently revised and updated version of "Real Men Don't: Anti-Male Bias in English," first published in the University of Dayton Review 18 (Winter/Spring, 1986-87), August examines the anti-male bias that is reflected in our language and, in turn, encourages yet more such bias. He claims, "Wholesale denunciations of males as oppressors, exploiters, rapists, Nazis, and slave-drivers have become all too familiar during the past three decades. Too often the academic community, rather than opposing this sexism, has been encouraging it."

Despite numerous studies of sex bias in language during the past three decades, only rarely has anti-male bias been examined. In part, this neglect occurs because many of these studies have been based upon assumptions that, at best, are questionable and, at worst, exhibit their own sex bias. Whether explicitly or implicitly, many of these studies reduce human history to a tale of male oppressors and female victims or rebels. In this view of things, all societies become *patriarchal societies*, a familiar term used to suggest that for centuries males have conspired to exploit and demean females. Accordingly, it is alleged in many of these studies that men control language and that they use it to define women and women's roles as inferior.

Despite the popularity of such a view, it has received scant support from leading social scientists, including one of the giants of modern anthropology, Margaret Mead. Anticipating current ideology, Mead in *Male and Female* firmly rejected the notion of a "male conspiracy to keep women in their place," arguing instead that

the historical trend that listed women among the abused minorities . . . lingers on to obscure the issue and gives apparent point to the contention that this is a man-made world in which women have always been abused and must always fight for their rights.

It takes considerable effort on the part of both men and women to reorient ourselves to thinking — when we think basically — that this is a world not made by men alone, in which women are unwilling and helpless dupes and fools or else powerful schemers hiding their power under their ruffled petticoats, but a world made by mankind for human beings of both sexes. (298, 299-300)

The model described by Mead and other social scientists shows a world in which women and men have lived together throughout history in a symbiotic relationship, often mutually agreeing upon the definition of gender roles and the distribution of various powers and duties.

More importantly for the subject of bias in speech and writing, women — as well as men — have shaped language. As Walter J. Ong reminds us,

Women talk and think as much as men do, and with few exceptions we all . . . learn to talk and think in the first instance largely from women, usually and predominantly our mothers. Our first tongue is called our "mother tongue" in English and in many other languages. . . . There are no father tongues. . . . (36)

Feminists such as Dorothy Dinnerstein agree: "There seems no reason to doubt that the baby-tending sex contributed at least equally with the history-making one to the most fundamental of all human inventions: language" (22). The idea that language is "man made," as Dale Spender and others argue, fits ideology better than the evidence.

During the past thirty years, anti-male bias in English has been greatly fostered by *misandry*, hatred of men, that is the acceptable sexism of the media, the educational world, and the entertainment industry. A related term is *androphobia*, an irrational fear and loathing of males. "There has been a veritable blitzkrieg on the male gender," note Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, "what amounts to an outright demonization of men and a slander against masculinity" (156). This misandry has given rise to a language of anti-male hatred that excludes, restricts, and denigrates men and masculinity.

Much of this misandry is the work of what Christina Hoff Sommers calls *gender feminists* (19-25). Distinguished from *equity feminists*, who seek legal and social equality between the sexes, gender feminists see themselves engaged in a crusade against a sex and gender system constructed by powerful males. This system, which they label *patriarchy*, allegedly oppresses females and privileges males. Gender feminism owes much to Marxist theory of class warfare and is often fueled by a lesbian separatist agenda (Spender ch. 4). It caricatures males as inherently evil, a class of privileged oppressors who hate and fear women. Among the tools of patriarchy's oppression are fatherhood, the two-parent family, and language. In Adrienne Rich's oft-quoted remark: "*This is the oppressors' language*" (qtd. in Spender, 178).

Gender feminist misandry, distortions of patriarchy, and views of language have all been challenged, mostly by equity feminists and men's rights advocates. Still, gender feminism remains perhaps the most influential ideology of our time. Its impact on nearly all aspects of life, including language, continues to be immense.

In modern English, three kinds of anti-male language are evident: first, gender-exclusive usage that omits males from certain kinds of consideration; second, gender-restrictive language that attempts to restrict males to an accepted gender role, some aspects of which may be outmoded, burdensome, or destructive; and third, negative stereotypes of males.

Gender feminists insist upon gender-inclusive language and seek to eradicate terms such as *man* and *he* used generically for humans of both sexes. Yet gender feminism fosters its own forms of gender-exclusive usage for political purposes. The Ms. Foundation, for example, resolutely refuses to alter its *Take Our Daughters to Work Day* to *Take Our Children to Work Day*, lest boys be invited. Gender feminist groups lobbied successfully in Congress for a *Violence Against Women Act*, even though American males are almost twice as likely as females to be victims of violent crimes (even when rape is included in the tally) and three times more likely to be victims of murder (Farrell *Myth*, 32). A woman who kills her male partner can plead the *Battered Woman's Syndrome*; a man who kills (or even defends himself against) a violent female partner cannot plead the *Battered Man's Syndrome*.

In the U.S. media, which is heavily influenced by gender feminism, language routinely excludes males as victims. Male victims are simply not news; women (and children) victims are. If men suffer harm, media language is gender-neutral: "Fifteen miners were killed in a West Virginia mine explosion today." If women are victims, the language becomes gender-specific: "Two women were among the fifteen miners killed in a West Virginia mine explosion today."

In academia and the media, there is an almost complete ban on discussing the victims of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape in gender-inclusive terms.

Every responsible study of domestic violence from the 1970s to the present has reported significant numbers of violent women and battered men (see, e.g., Straus, 40-41), but gender feminists steadfastly deny the existence of abusive women and abused men. The slogan for a national campaign against domestic violence reads: "Domestic violence is the one thing that hurts women and their children the most. . . ." Not only does the slogan erase all hint of battered men, but it also proclaims that children belong exclusively to mothers ("women and their children"). Similarly, the term *wife and child abuse* conceals the existence of an estimated 282,000 husbands who are battered annually (O'Reilly, 23).

Although males have already won court cases of sexual harassment against female bosses, *sexual harassment* is still widely defined as "harassment of women by men."

The term *rape* is a favorite with misandrists, who insist that rape is a crime committed *only* by males in which *only* females are victims. "Crime knows no gender," writes a reporter: "Yet, there is one crime that only women are prey to: rape" (Mougey). A college brochure defines *rape* as "the universal crime against women." Such statements ignore entirely the millions of boys and men who are raped each year, many of them (but by no means all) in so-called "correctional facilities." The belief that a male cannot be raped by a female is still widespread, despite evidence to the contrary (e.g., Sarrel, Struckman-Johnson).

The word *rape* is often used as a brush to tar all males. In *Against Our Will* Susan Brownmiller writes: "From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape . . . is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (15; italics in original). Making the point explicitly, Marilyn French states, "All men are rapists and that's all they are" (Jennes 33). Given this kind of smear tactic, *rape* is often stretched into a vague "accordion term" or used metaphorically. To provide "evidence" of an epidemic of rape on college campuses, Mary Koss expanded the term *rape* so broadly that 73 percent of the women whom Koss defined as rape victims did not agree that they had been raped (Sommers, 213-14). Used metaphorically, *rape* means anything that one wishes to blame on males alone. Ecofeminist Andr e Collard's *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence Against Animals and the Earth* suggests that only males do harm to the environment. Such usage trivializes the word *rape* and the suffering of genuine rape victims.

Unlike gender-exclusive language, gender-restrictive language is usually applied to males only, often to keep them within the confines of a socially prescribed gender role. When considering gender-restrictive language, one must keep in mind that — as Ruth E. Hartley has pointed out — the masculine gender role is enforced earlier and more harshly than the feminine role is (235). In addition, because the boy is often raised primarily by females in the virtual absence of close adult males, his grasp of what is required of him to be a man is often unsure. Likewise, prescriptions for male behavior are usually given in the negative, leading to the "Real Men Don't" syndrome, a process that further confuses the boy. Such circumstances leave many males extremely vulnerable to language that questions their masculinity.

Furthermore, during the past twenty years an increasing number of men and women have been arguing that aspects of our society's masculine gender role are emotionally constrictive, unnecessarily stressful, and potentially lethal. Rejecting "the myth of masculine privilege," psychologist Herb Goldberg reports in *The Hazards of Being Male* that "every critical statistic in the area of longevity [early death], disease, suicide,

crime, accidents, childhood emotional disorders, alcoholism, and drug addiction shows a disproportionately higher male rate" (5). But changes in the masculine role are so disturbing to so many people that the male who attempts to break out of familiar gender patterns often finds himself facing hostile opposition which can be readily and powerfully expressed in a formidable array of sex-biased terms.

To see how the process works, let us begin early in the male life cycle. A boy quickly learns that, while it is usually acceptable for girls to be *tomboys*, God forbid that he should be a *sissy*. In *Sexual Signatures: On Being a Man or a Woman*, John Money and Patricia Tucker note:

The current feminine stereotype in our culture is flexible enough to let a girl behave "boyishly" if she wants to without bringing her femininity into question, but any boy who exhibits "girlish" behavior is promptly suspected of being queer. There isn't even a word corresponding to "tomboy" to describe such a boy. "Sissy" perhaps comes closest, or "artistic" and "sensitive," but unlike "tomboy," such terms are burdened with unfavorable connotations. (72)

Lacking a favorable or even neutral term to describe the boy who is quiet, gentle, and emotional, the English language has long had a rich vocabulary to insult and ridicule such boys — *mama's boy*, *mollycoddle*, *milksop*, *muff*, *lightweight*, *twit*, *softy*, *creampuff*, *pantywaist*, *weakling*, *weenie*, *Miss Nancy*, and so on. The current popular *wimp* and *wuss* can be used to insult males from childhood right into adulthood.

Discussion of words such as *sissy* as insults have been often one-sided: most commentators are content to argue that the female, not the male, is being insulted by such usage. "The implicit sexism" in such terms, writes one commentator, "disparages the woman, not the man" (Sorrels, 87). Such arguments are typical of gender feminist special pleading. A boy who has been called a *sissy* knows that *he* has been insulted, not his sister. The object of ridicule in such expressions is not the feminine but the male who cannot differentiate himself from the feminine. Ong argues in *Fighting for Life* that most societies place heavy pressure on males to differentiate themselves from females because the prevailing environment of human society is feminine (70–71). In English-speaking societies, terms such as *sissy* and *weak sister*, which have been used by both females and males, are not insults to females but ridicule of males who have allegedly failed to differentiate themselves from feminine.

Being *all boy* carries penalties, however: for one thing, it means being less lovable. As the nursery rhyme tells children, little girls are made of "sugar and spice and all that's nice," while little boys are made of "frogs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails." Or, as an American version of the rhyme puts it:

Girls are dandy,
Made of candy —

That's what little girls are made of.
Boys are rotten,
Made of cotton —
That's what little boys are made of.
(Baring-Gould, 176)

When not enjoined to *be all boy*, our young lad will be urged to *be a big boy*, *be a brave soldier*, and (the ultimate appeal) *be a man*. These expressions almost invariably mean that the boy is about to suffer something painful or humiliating. The variant — *take it like a man* — provides the clue. As Paul Theroux defines it, *be a man* means: "Be stupid, be unfeeling, obedient and soldierly, and stop thinking."

Following our boy further into the life cycle, we discover that in school he will find himself in a cruel bind: girls his age will be biologically and socially more mature than he is, at least until around age eighteen. Until then, any ineptness in his social role will be castigated by a host of terms that are reserved almost entirely for males. "For all practical purposes," John Gordon remarks, "the word 'turkey' (or whatever the equivalent is now) can be translated as 'a boy spurned by influential girls'" (141). The equivalents of *turkey* are many: *jerk*, *nerd*, *clod*, *klutz*, *schmuck*, *dummy*, *goon*, *dork*, *reject*, *retard*, *square*, *dweeb*, *jackass*, *meathead*, *geek*, *zero*, *goofball*, *drip*, and numerous others, including many obscene terms. A Michigan high school decided to do away with a scheduled "Nerd Day" after a fourteen-year-old male student, who apparently had been so harassed as a nerd by other students, committed suicide ("Nerd' day"). In this case, the ability of language to devastate the emotionally vulnerable young male is powerfully and pathetically dramatized.

As our boy grows, he faces threats and taunts if he does not take risks or endure pain to prove his manhood. *Coward*, for example, is a word applied almost exclusively to males in our society, as are its numerous variants — *chicken*, *chicken-shit*, *yellow*, *yellow-bellied*, *lily-livered*, *weak-kneed*, *spineless*, *squirrelly*, *frayid cat*, *gutless wonder*, *weakling*, *butterfly*, *jellyfish*, and so on. If our young man walks away from a stupid quarrel or prefers to settle differences more rationally than with a swift jab to the jaw, the English language is richly supplied with these and other expressions to call his masculinity into question.

Chief among the other expressions that question masculinity is a lengthy list of homophobic terms such as *queer*, *pansy*, *fag*, *faggot*, *queen*, *queeny*, *pervert*, *bugger*, *deviant*, *fairy*, *tinkerbelle*, *puss*, *priss*, *flamer*, *feller*, *sweet*, *precious*, *fruit*, *twinkie*, *sodomite*, and numerous others, many obscene. For many people, *gay* is an all-purpose word of ridicule and condemnation. Although homosexuals are being insulted by these terms, the target is often the heterosexual male who fails or refuses to live up to someone else's idea of masculinity. In "Homophobia Among Men" Gregory K. Lehne explains, "Homophobia is used as a technique of social control by homosexual individuals to enforce the norms of male sex-role

behavior. . . . [H]omosexuality is not the real threat, the real threat is change in the male sex-role" (77).

Nowhere is this threat more apparent than in challenges to our society's male-only military obligation. When a young man and a young woman reach the age of eighteen, both may register to vote; only the young man is required by law to register for military service. For the next decade at least, he must stand ready to be called into military service and even into combat duty in wars, "police actions," "peace-keeping missions," and "rescue missions," often initiated by legally dubious means. Should he resist this obligation, he may be called a *draft dodger*, *deserter*, *peace-nik*, *traitor*, *shirker*, *slacker*, *malingerer*, and similar terms. Should he declare himself a conscientious objector, he may be labeled a *conchy* or any of the variants of *coward*.

In his relationships with women, he will find that the age of equality has not yet arrived. Usually, he will be expected to take the initiative, do the driving, pick up the tab, and in general show a deferential respect for women that is a left-over from the chivalric code. Should he behave in an *ungentlemanly* fashion, a host of words — which are applied almost always to males alone — can be used to tell him so: *louse*, *rat*, *creep*, *sleaze*, *scum*, *stain*, *worm*, *fink*, *heel*, *beast*, *fascist*, *stinker*, *animal*, *savage*, *bounder*, *cad*, *wolf*, *gigolo*, *womanizer*, *Don Juan*, *pig*, *rotter*, *boor*, and so on.

In sexual matters he will usually be expected to take the initiative and to *perform*. If he does not, he will be labeled *impotent*. While it is sexist to call a woman *frigid*, it is acceptable to call a man *impotent*. Metaphorically, *impotent* can be used to demean any male whose efforts in any area are deemed inadequate. Even if our young man succeeds at his sexual performance, the sex manuals are ready to warn him that if he reaches orgasm before a specified time, he is guilty of *premature ejaculation*.

When our young man marries, he will be required by law and social custom to support his wife and children. Should he not succeed as breadwinner or should he relax in his efforts, the language offers numerous terms to revile him: *loser*, *dead beat*, *bum*, *freeloader*, *leech*, *parasite*, *gold-brick*, *sponge*, *mooch*, *scrounger*, *ne'er-do-well*, *good for nothing*, and so on. If he does not meet child support payments, he will be labeled a *deadbeat dad* — even if he is disabled, unemployed, or broke. If women in our society hate being regarded as sex objects, men have been regarded as success objects, that is, judged by their ability to provide a standard of living. The title of a recent book — *How to Marry a Winner* — reveals immediately that the intended audience is female (Collier).

When he becomes a father, our young man will discover that he is a second-class parent, as the traditional interchangeability of *mother* and *parent* indicates. The law has been particularly obtuse in recognizing fathers as parents, as evidenced by the awarding of child custody to mothers in 90 percent of divorce cases. In one case a father's petition for custody of his four-year-old son was denied because, as the family court

judge said, "Fathers don't make good mothers" (qtd. in Levine, 21). The judge apparently never considered whether *fathers* make good *parents*.

And so it goes throughout our young man's life: if he deviates from society's gender role norm, he will be penalized and he will hear about it.

The final form of anti-male bias to be considered here is negative stereotyping. Sometimes this stereotyping is indirectly embedded in the language, sometimes it resides in misandric assumptions about males that shape responses to seemingly neutral words, and sometimes it is overtly created for political reasons. It is one thing to say that some aspects of the traditional masculine gender role are limiting and hurtful; it is quite another to denounce males in general as evil or to portray them in wholesale fashion as oppressors and exploiters. In *The New Male* Goldberg writes, "Men may very well be the last remaining subgroup in our society that can be blatantly, negatively, and vilely stereotyped with little objection or resistance" (103). With the ascendancy of gender feminism, such sexist stereotyping is not only familiar but fashionable.

In English, crime and evil are usually attributed to the male. Nearly all the words for law-breakers suggest males rather than females. These words include *murderer*, *swindler*, *crook*, *criminal*, *burglar*, *thief*, *gangster*, *mobster*, *hood*, *hitman*, *killer*, *pickpocket*, *mugger*, and *terrorist*. For whatever reasons, English usage conveys a subtle suggestion that males are to be regarded as guilty in matters of law-breaking.

This hint of male guilt extends to a term like *suspect*. When the suspect is unknown, he or she is usually presumed to be a he. For example, even before a definite suspect had been identified, the perpetrator of a series of Atlanta child murders was popularly known as *The Man*. When a male and female are suspected of a crime, the male is usually presumed the guilty party. In a notorious murder case, when two suspects — Debra Brown and Alton Coleman — were apprehended, police discovered *Brown's* fingerprint in a victim's car and interpreted this as evidence of *Coleman's* guilt. As the Associated Press reported:

Authorities say for the first time they have evidence linking Alton Coleman with the death of an Indianapolis man. A fingerprint found in the car of Eugene Scott has been identified as that of Debra Brown, Coleman's companion. . . . ("Police")

Nowhere does the article suggest that Brown's fingerprint found in the victim's car linked Brown with the death: the male suspect was presumed the guilty party, while the female was only a "traveling companion." Even after Brown had been convicted of two murders, the Associated Press was still describing her as "the accused accomplice of convicted killer Alton Coleman" ("Indiana").

In some cases, this presumption of male guilt extends to crimes in which males are not the principal offenders. As noted earlier, a term such as *wife and child abuse* ignores battered husbands, but it does more: it

suggests that males alone abuse children. In reality most child abuse is committed by mothers (Straus, 71). Despite this fact, a study of child abuse bears the title *Sins of the Fathers* (Inglis).

Not only crimes but vices of all sorts have been typically attributed to males. As Muriel R. Schulz points out, "The synonyms for inebriate . . . seem to be coded primarily 'male': for example, *boozer, drunkard, tippler, toper, swiller, tosspot, guzzler, barfly, drunk, lush, boozehound, souse, tank, stew, rummy, and bum*" (126). Likewise, someone may be *drunk as a lord* but never *drunk as a lady*.

Sex bias or sexism itself is widely held to be a male-only fault. When sexism is defined as "contempt for women" — as if there were no such thing as contempt for men — the definition of sexism is itself sexist (Bardwick, 34).

Part of the reason for this masculinization of evil may be that in the Western world the source of evil has long been depicted in male terms. In the Bible, the Evil One is consistently referred to as *he*, whether the reference is to the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Satan as Adversary in Job, Lucifer and Beelzebub in the gospels, Jesus' tempter in the desert, or the dragon in Revelations. Beelzebub, incidentally, is often translated as *lord of the flies*, a term designating the demon as masculine. So masculine is the word *devil* that the female prefix is needed, as in *she-devil*, to make a feminine noun of it. The masculinization of evil is so unconsciously accepted that writers often attest to it even while attempting to deny it, as in this passage:

From the very beginning, the Judeo-Christian tradition has linked women and evil. When second-century theologians struggled to explain the Devil's origins, they surmised that Satan and his various devils had once been angels. (Gerzon, 224)

If the Judeo-Christian tradition has linked women and evil so closely, why is the writer using the masculine pronoun *his* to refer to Satan, the source of evil according to that tradition? Critics of sex-bias in religious language seldom notice or mention its masculinization of evil: of those objecting to God the Father as sexist, no one — to my knowledge — has suggested that designating Satan as the Father of Lies is equally sexist. Few theologians talk about Satan and her legions.

The tendency to blame nearly everything on men has climaxed in recent times with the popularity of such terms as *patriarchy, patriarchal society*, and *male-dominated society*. More political than descriptive, these terms are rapidly becoming meaningless, used as all-purpose smear words to conjure up images of male oppressors and female victims. They are a linguistic sleight of hand which obscures the point that, as Mead has observed (299–300), societies are largely created by both sexes for both sexes. By using a swift reference to *patriarchal structures* or *patriarchal attitudes*, a writer can absolve females of all blame for society's flaws

while fixing the onus solely on males. The give-away of this ploy can be detected when *patriarchy* and its related terms are never used in a positive or neutral context, but are always used to assign blame to males alone.

Wholesale denunciations of males as oppressors, exploiters, rapists, Nazis, and slave-drivers have become all too familiar during the past three decades. Too often the academic community, rather than opposing this sexism, has been encouraging it. All too many scholars and teachers have hopped on the male-bashing bandwagon to disseminate what John Gordon calls "the myth of the monstrous male." With increasing frequency, this academically fashionable misandry can also be heard echoing from our students. "A white upper-middle-class straight male should seriously consider another college," declares a midwestern college student in the *New York Times Selective Guide to Colleges*. "You [the white male] are the bane of the world. . . . Ten generations of social ills can and will be strapped upon your shoulders" (qtd. in Fiske, 12). It would be comforting to dismiss this student's compound of misinformation, misandry, sexism, racism, and self-righteousness as an extreme example, but similar yahoosisms go unchallenged almost everywhere in modern academia.

Surely it is time for men and women of good will to confront the misandry that prevails on most campuses. For teachers and writers, the first task is to recognize and condemn forms of anti-male bias in language, whether they are used to exclude males from equal consideration with females, to reinforce restrictive aspects of the masculine gender role, or to stereotype males callously. For whether males are told that fathers don't make good mothers, that real men don't cry, or that all men are rapists, the results are potentially dangerous: like any other group, males can be subtly shaped into what society keeps telling them they are. In *Why Men Are the Way They Are* Warren Farrell puts the matter succinctly: "The more we make men the enemy, the more they will have to behave like the enemy" (357).

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EXAMINING THE ISSUE CRITICALLY

1. Is August simply whining about prejudice directed toward men, or do you find some truth in his argument? Does his argument fall apart anywhere? Explain.
2. Using Judith Bardwick as a source, August says the following in paragraph 34: "Sex bias or sexism itself is widely held to be a male-only fault. When sexism is defined as 'contempt for women' — as if there were no such thing as contempt for men — the definition of sexism is itself sexist."
3. One of the more disturbing statements that August makes is the following: "Too often the academic community, rather than opposing this sexism, has been encouraging it" (37). Has that been true in your experience? If so, does it mean that we need to be less vigilant about prejudice directed against women? What is the answer to the problem, if you believe there is one?