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National College of Art & Design  
Faculty of Craft: Metalwork

THE FALLACY OF MALE SUPREMACY

A Study of Male Oppression  
under Patriarchy and the Search  
for a New Symbolic Order.

by  
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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design  
and Complementary Studies in Candidacy  
for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Design  
1998

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my tutor, Lorna Healy, for invaluable advice and direction; Jonathan May, for typing, advice and patience; and finally Daphne Henderson and Julie Murnahan for encouragement.





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## INTRODUCTION

By way of explaining my choice of thesis topic I would like to describe a situation I witnessed about a year ago. I was enjoying an evening meal in South Street, an Italian restaurant on George's Street in Dublin's city centre, during which three rather nervous-looking male transvestites came in and sat down. I would like to stress they were not drag queens, meaning that there was nothing glamorous or ostentatious about these individuals. On the contrary they seemed to be trying, though unsuccessfully, to be inconspicuous. Immediately the atmosphere in the restaurant changed. It was obvious from the body language, though some were more subtle than others, that everyone's attention, including my own, was focused on these men. The tension must have been unbearable since within ten minutes they hurriedly left.

It dawned on me that, like many other women, I was dressed masculinely, for I was wearing my usual hiking-boots, jeans, my brother's jumper, and a jacket that came from the men's department of Dunnes' Stores. What struck me then was that men, supposedly the dominant sex in our society are unable to wear what they want, whereas as a woman I am. Thus I have chosen this topic to explore the possibility that in specific ways patriarchy is oppressive to some men.

Through a discussion of binary oppositions, I will explore patriarchal inequalities. I will show that the desire to maintain these inequalities has led to the construction of phallogentric gender stereotypes, which are supported by claims that they result from inherent differences between the sexes. In order to determine the





validity of these claims I will look at essentialist and non-essentialist approaches to and interpretations of sex and gender difference. My conclusion is that though there are inherent influences on behaviour it is through the process of socialisation that exclusive gender stereotypes are constructed.

I use the examples of transvestism, transsexualism, and men's health to demonstrate that exclusive and phallocentric stereotypes, contrary to feminism and patriarchal ideology, endanger and oppress men. Finally I propose that by using an alternative to phallic symbolism, we can free ourselves from patriarchal phal;locentric oppression.





## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.1 Binary Oppositions

A central theme of this thesis involves the two binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine. In order to gain a fuller understanding of binary oppositions I will discuss the work of two theorists. The first, a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the second a French philosopher specialising in linguistics, Jacques Derrida.

Saussure was among the first to theorise on the social construction of language, earning him the reputation as the father of modern linguistics. According to Saussure "language is a system of signs" (Hall, 1997: 21). Not only written and spoken words, but objects act as signs and it is through their shared meaning that individuals within a group, culture, or society can communicate. Saussure divided signs into two elements. The first, the signifier, relates to the object, word, or image. The second, the signified, corresponds to the concept that the object, word, or image triggers off in our heads. Thus the image of a dog triggers the concept dog and the two together create the sign dog. "The sign is the union of the form which signifies (signifier)...and an idea signified (signified)" (Ibid.: 31). Saussure named his area of specialisation semiology from the Greek word *semion* meaning 'sign'. Today we refer to the study of signs within a cultural context as semiotics.

Later Saussure theorised that signifiers do not exist independently but are organised into binaric couples, where each signifier in the couple provides the other with meaning.

"His attention to binary oppositions brought Saussure to the revolutionary proposition that a language consists of



signifiers, but in order to produce meaning the signifiers have to be organised into a 'system of difference'. It is the differences between signifiers which signify" (Ibid.: 32).

### **1.2 Social Implications of Binary Oppositions**

Saussure did not theorise on the social implications of binary oppositions, restricting his study solely to linguistics. However, semiotics provided a framework whereby social structure could be understood as a system of signs. For example human groups and identities are also organised according to binary oppositions; The binaries of male/female, black/white, Jew/gentile, gay/straight, abled/ disabled, and upper class/lower class, work to maintain clear distinctions between groups, demonstrating how "identity is marked by difference" (Woodward, 1997: 9).

Jacques Derrida has developed his theories particularly around the social implications of such binary oppositions. According to Woodward Derrida argues that

there are very few neutral binary oppositions. One pole of the binary...is usually the dominant one, the one which includes the other within its field of operations. There is always a relationship of power between the poles of a binary opposition (Ibid.: 235).

It is the power relationship of the binary male/female within patriarchal society which I will be discussing in the next section.

### **1.3 Patriarchy, Sex, and Gender Difference**

Many feminists have employed the concept of patriarchy to explore the binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine. Male/female refers to the biological (ie. sex) differences between the sexes and masculine/feminine refers to the behavioural (ie. gender)





differences between the sexes. Silvia Walby, a feminist writer, by defining patriarchy as a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women", emphasises how sex difference is used to construct gender inequalities (Walby in Murry, 1995: 8). Therefore the feminist view is that gender inequalities, being constructed by a social system, can be changed.

By contrast, the essentialist approach to sex difference, as adopted by sociobiology for example, holds that gender inequalities result from inherent biological differences between the sexes, and are therefore fixed. By purporting this, the essentialists are saying to those dissatisfied with gender inequalities that their circumstances are not the result of an oppressive society but the result of their sex. From a feminist point of view, this approach, by holding that gender inequalities are not subject to change, reinforces patriarchal social structures.



## CHAPTER TWO

In this chapter I hope to demonstrate that contrary to essentialist thinking, neither all women nor all men possess an exclusive set of characteristics. By reinterpreting the essentialist findings of sociobiology, I hope to demonstrate that men and women share a variety of biological characteristics leading to enormous physical variation between and within the sexes. I will show that "claims of sex differences...are more often properly seen as the starting point of these studies, rather than the conclusions" (Fox Keller, in Kirkup and Gill, 1992: 45). I should add that it is not the purpose of this thesis to criticise the research methods of sociobiology, but only to question the dichotomous interpretation of its findings.

### 2.1 Sociobiological Approach to Sex Difference

"The foundations of sociobiology rest on the existence of sex difference, that is, a view that the categories of 'male' and 'female' refer to absolute opposites" (Shilling, in Woodward, 1997: 75).

Within sociobiological discourse, differences in chromosomes and genes, hormones and brain structure have been cited as the biological determinants responsible for absolute sex (and therefore gender) difference between men and women.





## 2.2 Chromosomes

At conception we *usually* receive twenty-three X chromosomes from our mothers and either twenty-three X or twenty-two X and one Y chromosome from our father. These forty-six chromosomes organise themselves into twenty-three pairs. "Of these pairs, twenty-two are autosomes, possessed equally by males and females, the twenty-third pair, the sex chromosomes differ in males and females" (Mussen et al, 1984: 34).

Females are notated 'XX' and males are 'XY'. "A penis is usually present when the genetic [or chromosomal] material is XY (male) and absent when it is XX (female)" (Shilling, in Woodward, 1997: 75). It is interesting that Shilling points out the sociobiological tendency to define femaleness in terms of negation, ie. a female is someone who does not have a penis. Sociobiologists have attributed sex difference to the 'absolute' difference in chromosomes. However since women and men have forty-five chromosomes in common, I would suggest, chromosomally at least, that they are not dichotomously different.

Even sex chromosomes do not guarantee sex difference as implied by sociobiology. It is possible for individuals with 'XX' chromosomes (females) to have 'male' external genitalia and 'XY' individuals (males) to have 'female' external genitalia. Testicular feminisation syndrome describes an individual who is XY with 'female' external genitalia; androgenital syndrome is the reverse situation. These individuals are usually socialised according to their external appearance. Thus though being chromosomally male, individuals with testicular feminisation syndrome, due to their lack of a penis, are raised as girls and conversely, individuals with androgenital syndrome, though chromosomally female, due to their possession of a penis are raised as boys (Giddens, 1986: 161). This demonstrates the social importance of the penis in determining sex.



Sex chromosomes are not always XX or XY.

An XXY or XXXY pattern, results in Klinefelter's Syndrome in which the reproductive system looks male but the testes are infertile. In Turner's Syndrome there is an abnormality of one of the X chromosomes and other abnormal chromosomal patterns result in hermaphroditism" (Bullough and Bullough, 1993: 270).

Therefore I would argue, chromosomally at least, one cannot describe all individuals as definitively male or female. So what *is* responsible for making an individual definitively 'male or 'female'? Recent sociobiological discourse has turned to hormonal differences to answer this question.

### 2.3 Hormones

Studies have shown that male hormones are the initial factor in determining the sex of a child. If a female foetus, genetically XX, is exposed to male hormones, the baby is born looking like a normal male. If a male foetus, genetically XY, is deprived of male hormones, the baby is born looking like a normal female" (Moir and Jessel, 1989: 22).

What is meant here by "looking like a normal male" is the possession of a penis. Thus we are to understand that male hormones are the definitive instigators of sex because they provide any individual possessing them with a penis. It is interesting to note that it is a *lack* of male hormones that is deemed responsible for the formation of the female sex. It seems to have been either ignored or forgotten that any foetus, either male or female, while it is developing within a woman's body is going to be immersed in female hormones. So once again, rather than defining the female sex in terms of negation, I would argue that it is not the *lack* of male hormones that causes a foetus to develop female characteristics, but its presence in a female hormone-rich environment.





The production of male hormones in a XY foetus is essential to counteract the effects of a female hormone-rich environment, so that it can develop male characteristics.

Discussions of male and female hormones can be very misleading as the following quote indicates. "The hormonal differences between the sexes is not a matter of either or but of the proportions of masculinising and feminising hormones" (Mussen, 1984: 463). However, even this degree of hormone sex-stereotyping has recently been found to be misrepresentative.

The growing awareness of oestrogen's prolific influence comes hot on the heels of three key developments which have knocked the sex-stereotyping of oestrogen for six, according to Professor Richard Sharp of the Medical Research Council's Reproductive Biology Unit in Edinburgh (Bower, 1997: 45).

Firstly, researchers found to their surprise that in animals bred not to have oestrogen receptors, the males were infertile. Secondly, in two men born without the ability to process oestrogen, both grew to be over seven feet tall, had the bone age of a fourteen year old boy, were severely osteoporotic, and were infertile. Thirdly, in Sweden in 1996, scientists accidentally "discovered a new type of oestrogen, oestrogen beta... but stunned [them] by turning up in abundance in male reproductive organs" (Bower, 1997: 45) (my brackets). With regard to the above, Professor Sharp concludes that "oestrogen receptors now appear to be in so many reproductive tissues in males you have to ask how we ever managed to explain reproduction in men without involving oestrogen" (Bower, 1997: 45).

Oestrogen was originally thought to have been specific to females. Later, in the seventies, when found in small amounts in men (Mussen, 1984: 463), though "regarded as little more than an amusing side issue"



(Bower, 1997: 45), it was then described as a feminising hormone. Now that it is understood to be essential for both male and female health and reproduction, the sex-stereotyping of oestrogen seems to be irrelevant. Hence, from this we can see how "biology...and medicine have contributed to the construction of sex and gender in the way empirical data have been assembled and used in the construction of theories which contained implicit ideological bias" (Kirkup, 1992: 80).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with the suggestion that sociobiological discourse is greatly influenced by patriarchal phallogentric ideology. The sociobiological discourse on sex difference starts with a phallogentric premise, where the penis is the absolute signifier of maleness and the lack of a penis is the absolute signifier of femaleness.

"The desire to prove the existence of significant sex difference continues to be strong enough to override the empirical evidence; the ideological foundations of scientists have made it difficult to allow the empirical evidence to speak" (Ibid.: 75).

Bearing this in mind, I will move on to discuss the construction of gender difference.





## CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter I will be discussing both sociobiological and sociological discourses on gender stereotyping. Sociobiology follows an essentialist approach, ie. gender stereotypes have a biological origin, hormones, and are therefore fixed. The sociological discourse follows a non-essentialist approach, purporting that gender stereotypes result from the social environment, ie. when a child is born, through the process of socialisation he/she learns which behaviours are appropriate to his/her sex.

### 3.1 Hormonal Influences on Gender

According to sociobiological discourse, at six weeks a foetus usually begins to develop genitals and brain structure specific to its sex. Providing there are no other hormonal influences, either environmental (ie. medication), or physical (ie. imbalance), a female foetus (XX) will continue to develop a female brain structure since she is already in a female hormone-rich environment. The male foetus (XY) needs to produce "a vast surge of male hormone", four times that which is usually present in order to switch his brain structure from female to male (Moir and Jessel, 1989: 24). The sex-specific organisation of the brain does not become fully active until the arrival of the second surge of hormones at puberty, resulting in very specific behaviour in males or females (Ibid.: 96).

"It is our hormones which make us behave in specific, stereotypical ways" (Moir, 1989: 6). For example, according to Moir and



Jessel, one form of behaviour is that women grade their success in terms of their personal relationships while men grade their success in terms of their occupation (Ibid.: 166). Another is that "mothers are natural parents; men, with the best will in the world, are not" (Ibid.: 141).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to parenting skills, the sociobiological discourse suggests that women and men are both attracted to and show specific aptitudes for different occupations.

Boys, overwhelmingly, go into jobs with a mechanical or theoretical bias, the girls into jobs which for the most part, involve some form of human interaction, like catering, social, or secretarial work, or teaching" (Ibid.: 97).

It would seem then, according to this discourse, that hormones greatly influence behaviour. Experiments on animals also support this hypothesis. Animals exposed to high levels of progestins and oestrogens, thought to be feminising hormones, became more nurturing (Ibid.: 141), while exposing female monkeys to testosterone (considered to be a masculinising hormone), made them more aggressive (Giddens, 1986: 160).

I accept that hormones may greatly influence behaviour, but as we saw in chapter two, hormones are not dichotomous, but variant. What strikes me in regard to the above, is that considering the enormous hormonal variations and cross-over between the sexes, (enough to make an XX foetus produce a penis and an XY foetus produce a vagina), it seems strange that males should be "overwhelmingly" better at and attracted to certain jobs. However, the words "for the most part" would seem to imply that the gender stereotyping of jobs is less rigid for women than for men.

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<sup>1</sup>John Waters, vocal on sexism against men in terms of custody, disagrees with the "Motherhood is Natural" myth, and so would I. Lactation may facilitate a mother who wishes to breast feed, but I would argue does not necessarily make women better or natural parents. Conversely, men's inability to lactate does not necessarily mean that they are bad or unnatural parents.





Hormones, I would suggest, are not as dichotomous as sociobiology seems to imply. I would therefore argue that there is another factor influencing gender stereotypes, and this factor I believe to be the process of socialisation.

### **3.2 Social Influences on Gender**

"Socialisation is the process by which children acquire the values, beliefs, and standards of behaviour that are expected in their culture" (Mussen et al, 1984: 379). Behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner purport that children are socialised not just by passively observing and repeating the behaviour of their parents, but are also actively encouraged to behave appropriately through the process known as 'reinforcement'. "Reinforcers can be social (praise, affection), or nonsocial (material goods, special privileges)" (Mussen, 1984: 388). They can also be negative, otherwise known as punishment, and can vary from a slight parental frown to a severe beating (Ibid.: 389-391).

Like hormones, socialisation could also be viewed as considerably influential on gender behaviour. One case in the West involving identical twins (ie. siblings who are genetically and hormonally the same), demonstrates the influence of socialisation on gender stereotyping. One of the pair was seriously injured during circumcision. A decision was made to reconstruct female genitalia and raise the child as a girl. Throughout 'her' childhood 'she' played and behaved according to the 'normal' female stereotype. At the same time 'her' brother expressed the behaviour of a 'normal' male. Later interviews however, "revealed her to have considerable unease about her gender identity feeling perhaps she was 'really' a boy after all" (Giddens, 1986: 161).



This case I would suggest demonstrates that neither socialisation nor hormones exert an absolute influence over gender stereotypes. If socialisation exerted an absolute influence, 'she' would not have experienced a sense of "considerable unease" about 'her' gender identity; conversely, if hormonal influences were absolute it would not have been at all possible to socialise 'her' into a feminine gender identity.

Another informing study carried out by John Money and his colleagues Joan and John Hampson involved one hundred and five hermaphrodites. Despite having both sets of genitalia, and in differing degrees the internal reproductive structure including gonads of both sexes, all these individuals were socialised into behaving in accordance with either masculine or feminine gender roles. Of the sample group only five had a gender role identity that differed from the gender into which they had been socialised (Bullough, 1993: 269).

They concluded that psychosexuality was neutral at birth and determined almost entirely by socialisation. They identified the critical period for the development of gender identity as before twenty-seven months of age (Ibid.: 269).

However, according to the sociobiological discourse both genital appearance and gender behaviour are influenced by masculinising and feminising hormones. Hermaphrodites have the genitals of both sexes which would seem to imply that during the foetal stage of their development they had been exposed to both masculinising and feminising hormones. I would therefore suggest that they are more evenly predisposed to masculine or feminine gender roles than non-hermaphrodites.

John Money spent forty years working in the area of gender identity. In 1991 towards the end of his career he concluded that gender





identity "is undoubtedly related to a complex causal sequence involving multiple physiological and psychological variables" (Ibid.: 271).

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Though hormones clearly influence behaviour, sociobiological interpretations of them are used to support the existence of exclusive gender stereotypes. However, as we saw in chapter two this dichotomous interpretation was due to the influence of patriarchal phallocentric ideology. I would argue that it is through socialisation within the binary phallus/lack-of, that dichotomous gender stereotypes are constructed and maintained.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4.1 Patriarchal Oppression of Men

Feminist discourse focuses specifically on the oppression of women within patriarchal society. Men are cited as the benefactors of such a social structure. In the following chapter I hope to show that contrary to both feminist discourse and patriarchal ideology some men experience a variety of negative effects from patriarchal phallocentrism. I will discuss transvestism, transsexualism, and men's health in general.

### 4.2 Transvestites and Transsexuals

The reason I specifically focus on the "apparently marginal or aberrant cases, that of the transvestite and the transexual, [is that] both define and probematize the entire concept of 'male subjectivity' " (Garber, 1993, 325) [my insert].

Dr. Robert Stoller, a psychoanalyst and professor of psychiatry at University College of Los Angeles, describes the mechanism of transvestite behaviour thus:

The transvestite fights this battle against being destroyed by his feminine desires...by being always aware even at the height of the feminine behaviour - when he is fully dressed in women's clothes - that he has the absolute insignia of maleness, a penis" (Garber, 1993: 323).

In response to the above quote, it would appear to me that the transvestite sees "his feminine desires" not as part of himself, but opposing him, since he fears that they will destroy his maleness.





However, his possession of a penis allows him to indulge his "feminine desires" without the threat of becoming a woman, since a woman would never have a penis. Thus he (as male) can never be destroyed so long as he has "the absolute insignia of maleness".

I would suggest that though transvestites may appear to be deconstructing phallocentric gender identities, on the contrary they rigidly adhere to them. It would appear that the transvestite, influenced by binaric interpretations of gender believes that he can be only masculine. I feel that it is unfortunate that some transvestites experiencing feminine desires would interpret these as destructive, rather than being able to comfortably incorporate them into his overall identity.

For the transsexual, "the absolute insignia of maleness is what causes his despair. He does not wish to be a phallic 'woman'; he wishes to be a biologically normal woman" (Ibid.: 324).

Stoller purports that for transsexuals it is when the penis is erect that they have extreme loathing for it (Ibid.: 324). Within patriarchal society the phallus is the symbol of maleness and is always depicted as erect, thus transsexuals feel their body is particularly opposed to their gender when they have an erection. Prior to sex reassignment surgery, in an attempt to deny their penis, some transsexuals have engaged in the rather brutal activity of tying or sellotaping their penises between their legs, while at the same time tucking their testicles into their abdomen (Ibid.: 324). The internalisation of the binary, phallus/lack-of, seems to play an intrinsic part in transsexual behaviour.

Contrary to the advice of psychoanalysts, who argued that "it is one thing to remove diseased tissue and quite another to amputate healthy organs" the medical profession continued to develop and perform sex



reassignment surgery (Billings and Urban, in Ekins and King, 1996: 99-116). The medical profession shares the phallocentrism of transsexuals, since they also stress 'the presence or absence of a penis as the definitive insignia of gender' (Ibid.: 99).

In patriarchal society the binary, phallus/lack-of, is a signifier of privilege in which those who possess a phallus, males, receive privileges and those who don't, females, do not. Gender is the means by which those who should receive privileges and those who should not are distinguished (Nye, 1988: 187). I would suggest that men who wish to behave femininely, while possessing the absolute signifier of maleness, confuse and disrupt patriarchal phallocentric binaries, which in turn threatens to deconstruct the boundaries between the privileged and the non-privileged. The bestowal of privileges on women in an oppositional society as a result of the blurring of gender signifiers would be perceived as a loss of privileges for men. Thus in order to avert the threat of reduced privileges feminine behaviour in men is considered taboo.<sup>1</sup> Thus transvestites must limit their behaviour to their own private realms, and transsexuals are allowed to "become women", ie. amputating their absolute signifier of maleness since by "being women" rather than feminine men the patriarchal signifying binaries remain intact.

Research shows that male-to-female transsexuals far outnumber female-to-male. On average, in the West, the ratio is 4:1 but varies from country to country. For example, in Scandinavia the ratio is 3:1, while in Australia the ratio is 8:1 (Hafner, 1993: 158). These figures run contrary to what I would have expected. If patriarchal society, as feminist discourses

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<sup>1</sup> However it is not the same for women. By behaving masculinely they are disrupting phallocentric binary oppositions, but at the same time they are simultaneously demonstrating the value and desirability of the symbolic phallus, and therefore reinforcing patriarchy.





imply, is privileging to men and oppressive to women, why are there so many more men than women seeking to change their sex?

### 4.3 Oppressive Male Stereotype

According to Hafner, the main social influences on the sex ratio appears to be the rigidity of attitudes to sex roles, ... the more rigid the sex roles the greater is the the excess of men who seek sex change by surgical means...[thus] a major factor is the *restrictive nature* of the male sex role" (Ibid.: 158)(my insert).

Other studies correlate with Hafner's conclusion. Experiments have shown that as early as three boys will more rigidly adhere to sex-stereotyping. Children in a day-centre were given masculine, feminine, and neutral toys, according to adult stereotypes. Girls played almost entirely with the toys in all three categories, boys played predominantly with the masculine toys (Mussen et al, 1984: 345). "[B]ecause the male role has greater status than the female role in most societies, children of both sexes are often attracted to things that are defined as masculine" (Ibid.: 346).

Further research has shown that despite believing that they were treating their children equally, parents not only encouraged sex-stereotyped behaviour but actively discouraged boys from behaving femininely, while accepting masculine behaviour in girls (Ibid.: 348).

The range of behaviour considered appropriate and permissive for boys is narrower than that for girls. For instance, boys who are not aggressive enough are 'sissies'. Girls who are as aggressive as boys are simply 'tomboys', a label which is not especially negative. A passive girl on the other hand, is a "little lady" (Nathan and Harris, 1975: 49).





To conclude, through socialisation we learn gender behaviour; however, the range of behaviour appropriate for males is shown to be considerably narrower than that for females. Thus I would argue that patriarchal society is oppressive to some men.

#### **4.4 Men's Health**

Marjorie Garber states that "male identity [and] male subjectivity is determined by the penis" (Garber, 1993: 324-325). The determining of male identity in terms of the penis has resulted in psychological and emotional insecurity, and health risks for some men.

"Men may be excessively concerned by what they perceive to be some abnormality of the external genitalia." (Hall, 1994:251). A large penis often signifies strength and virility. A small or impotent penis signifies weakness or lack of masculinity. Since the phallus signifies power and status, advertising any weaknesses associated with the penis is avoided. "The statistical frequency of impotence and premature ejaculation still seems to be a well-kept secret...[as are] the sexual problems arising in middle-aged men" (Hall,1994:251)(my insert). Rather than be reassured, and even helped by the knowledge that they are not the only ones, men with a sexual difficulty often believe themselves to be uniquely cursed. Many men may quietly endure such problems, since a sense of inadequacy could lead to embarrassment and a reluctance in seeking help.

By contrast the medical profession could be described as obsessive in their attempts to demystify female reproduction. "Doctors have been accused of reducing all female disorders to the sexual/reproductive, of unnecessary interventions, of colonizing and controlling the female sex" (Hall, 1994: 252). However this has led to the development of new



techniques which result in the early detection of life-threatening diseases in women, leading to less severe medical intervention and the increased likelihood of a full recovery. By contrast "although testicular cancer is the most common malignant tumor in men between the ages of 24 and 30, and on the increase, doctors do not routinely examine men's testicles" (Hall, 1994: 254). It would appear that the medical profession even with the potential threat to life, continues to reinforce the phallic image by not incorporating the reality of the sick or flawed phallus into their medical practices. This unwillingness to deal with either health or functioning difficulties associated with the penis is not restricted to the medical profession. Men in general have "profound reservations about exposing sexual difficulties to other males"(Hall, 1994: 253).

Another area where men seem to fare considerably worse than women is suicide. In the west on average, men are four times as likely to commit suicide. By the age of seventy-five men are nearly ten times more likely to kill themselves than women of the same age (Hafner, 1993: 52). With regard to old men "contributing factors include social isolation, loneliness, fears of declining physical and mental health, and especially the fear of becoming dependent" (Hafner, 1993: 52). According to Hafner these factors result from the rigidity of male gender stereotyping (Ibid.: 52). Part of the masculine stereotype includes strength, mental capability and independence. Fears of declining physical and mental health, and dependency as contributory factors in male suicide would imply that some men are irrevocably attached to this stereotype. With regard to isolation and loneliness as a reason for suicide, it would seem that socialisation into rigid masculine stereotypes does not equip men with the skills necessary to satisfy their own emotional and social needs. Though Hafner does not offer figures on male suicide rates within marriage, it is interesting to





note that with regard to mental health, married men fare considerably better than single men. For women the situation is reversed (Hafner, 1993: 6-7).

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In sum, the phallic symbol as part of the binary phallus/lack-of, is central to the construction of masculine identity. I would argue that the phallus as signifier of power and privilege has led to an excessively rigid and potentially dangerous masculine stereotype, as demonstrated by the above discussions of transvestism, transsexualism, sexual dysfunction, health, and as a cause of suicide.

I would therefore suggest that *men* as well as women could benefit from the deconstruction of phallogentric gender stereotypes. In the next chapter I will discuss the work of several theorists, who propose that the construction of alternative symbolisms could provide a means of escape from phallic oppression.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler in "A Feminist Dictionary", define phallocentrism as "male-centredness which places the male-identified subject at the centre of intellect, perception, experience, values and language" (Kramarae, 1985: 335). I would suggest that phallocentrism permeates all facets of our society, influencing for instance interpretations of history, other cultures, linguistics, and theories of human behaviour. In this chapter I hope to demonstrate that phallic symbolism, the source of phallocentrism, is not fixed. I will do this using specific historical and linguistic discourses.

### 5.1 Female Reproductive Symbolism in History

I will source alternative symbolisms and suggest the lack of fixity of phallocentrism through a historical discourse.

The cult of the phallus, the source of life and symbol of virility, courage and power, first appeared in the vast civilisations that developed from India to the extreme edge of Western Europe at the beginning of the Neolithic era following the end of the Ice Age about 8,000 BC (Daniélou, 1993: 5).

Prior to this, phallic symbolism appears to be non-existent. Thus it would seem from the above quote safe to assume that phallic symbolism is not fixed and is therefore subject to change. In the past, phallocentric interpretations of cave paintings and etchings led some archaeologists to believe that the cave images represented arrows, barbs, and weapons of the male hunt. These have been more recently reinterpreted as plants, trees, and reeds, products of feminine foraging (Thurer, 1994: 9).





According to Alain Daniélou "among the cave paintings and carvings of the paleolithic era, ritual representations of the feminine principle are especially noticeable" (Daniélou, 1993: 5).

The French archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan, "decoded the recurrent and puzzling 'double-egg' figure as symbolising the vagina" (Thurer, 1994: 9). Many other images including those of certain flowers and triangular shapes have been interpreted as representations of the vulva (Ibid.: 9). In Ireland many of us are aware of the Sheela-na-Gig in which the figure is exposing her vagina. The question is why were genital characteristics almost exclusively depicted in prehistoric times? Further research provides a possible answer.

Many figures have been found as far apart as Western France and Siberia depicting women either in advanced stages of pregnancy or holding children. They date from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic eras, thirty thousand to eight thousand BC, and were discovered in caves, mountain-tops, at home altars and the earliest shrines (Thurer, 1994: 8). According to Thurer this suggests that "among the first 'thinking' humans it was specifically women's capacity to reproduce that inspired worship" (Ibid.: 9). It is impossible to say exactly how these factors affected the structure of early societies. However, we know from Brehon laws that in ancient Ireland pregnant women and mothers were accorded high status and specific rights (Condren, 1989: 62-63).

By classical times, any power and status which women may have enjoyed had considerably diminished. Her reproductive ability, a source of worship according to Thurer, was somehow re-interpreted as nothing more than accommodative to male offspring. In ancient Greece for example, "[t]he mother of the child that is called hers is not really its parent. She





just nurses the seed that is planted within her by the child's true parent, the male" (Aeschylus, in Thurer, 1994: 65).

Why should a symbolism centering on women's ability to bring forth children existing for a putative twenty thousand years, in the space of a few millenia be replaced by phallic symbolism? The theory I find most plausible centres around the development of animal husbandry and men's discovery of their paternity. Between eight and ten thousand years ago societal development underwent a gradual but radical change. Prior to this human groupings consisted of small nomadic tribes whose main source of food was obtained through scavenging and occasionally hunting animals and also by gathering whatever food happened to be in the vicinity. Due to changing geological conditions, more specifically the end of the Ice Age, the human population began to increase which in turn increased the competition for available food. Tribes were forced to either find alternatives to their nomadic existence or face extinction (Thurer, 1994: Chapter 1). "Gradually, in different regions at different times, the gatherers and hunters became horticulturists and later, agriculturists and breeders of animals, settling down in clans, villages, and towns" (Ibid.: 12).

At this time female reproductive characteristics, such as the vagina, pregnancy, and motherhood, were central social symbols. It was during this period that the phallus as a symbol began to emerge. "Jacques Dupuis has suggested in his latest book, 'Au Nom de Pere', that this passage from worship of the vulva to that of the phallus could be linked to the discovery of paternity" (Daniélou, 1993: 6). It may seem strange to us that man was unaware of his paternity, but Thurer asks the question, "how could a Paleolithic man guess that sex and babies were connected,



separated as they are by so many months and intervening variables?" (Thurer, 1994: 13).

Through keeping, observing, and eventually breeding livestock the human species gradually became aware of men's essential involvement in the reproductive process. Many feminists, including de Riencourt, Fisher, and Miles, (Ibid.: 310), "regard this knowledge as the beginning of the end, leading to the devaluation of women, the demise of equality, and the rise of the phallus" (Ibid.: 13).

This realisation for the first time meant that men were no longer excluded from the miraculous process of human creation. Gradually men's perceived role in reproduction became increasingly exclusive, leading to an almost complete absence of female reproductive symbolism (Ibid.: 2-80). The following quote demonstrates the absolute role of the phallus in reproduction

It is only when the penis stands up straight that it emits semen, the source of life. It is then called the phallus and has been considered...the image of the creative principle, a symbol of the process by which the Supreme Being procreates the Universe (Daniélou, 1993:1).

Thus we see that the phallus was put forward as the singular source of life, and as the sole symbol for the procreative power of the universe.

To sum up, due to the belief that only women were involved in reproduction, reproductive symbolism was therefore exclusively female. By eight thousand BC, as a consequence of animal husbandry, men discovered their paternity, resulting in the emergence of the phallus symbolising male fertility and reproductive power. As society changed so did interpretations of the phallus. By the time classical Greek civilisation was established, the phallus, within the binary male/female, had come to signify those with power, value and privileges resulting in the exclusion





of women from the symbolic order. Woman came to be identified in terms of negation, she who does not possess the phallus.

## 5.2 Phallic Symbolism

According to Lacan, "a woman must either submit to phallic order or lapse into feminine inarticulateness" (Nye, 1988: 186). What Lacan is suggesting is that it is impossible to communicate other than by means of phallogocentric language.

The Lacanian symbolic order is thus characterised by logocentrism, that is a primacy of language and the word. However, it is also characterised by phallogocentrism, which is the primacy of the phallus as the key signifier of meaning and the universal arbiter of sexuality (Segal, in Woodward, 1997: 201).

Critiques of Lacan have combined these two words, accusing him of phallogocentrism, since his theory does not allow for any alternative to phallogocentric language (Ibid.: 201). According to him women must forever submit to the phallic order in which "the phallus, as central discursive position, forever constitutes women in terms of what they lack" (Ibid.: 201).

However, I have suggested that the phallus was not always at the centre of the symbolic order, for prior to 8000 BC female reproductive characteristics dominated. Thus I would suggest an alternative to Lacanian phallogocentrism is possible through the construction of a new symbolic order. Several theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Lucy Irigaray, and Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger have proposed alternatives to phallic symbolism. It is these I will be discussing in the next half of this chapter.



### 5.3 Alternatives to Phallic Symbolism

As we saw in chapter one Saussure developed the concept of language as a system of signs. Derrida adapted Saussure's theory to show how language plays an integral role in the construction of social inequalities. According to Jonathan Rutherford, central to Derrida's theory is a system of binary distinctions, thus the societal centre, identified by the presence of the phallus, ie. men, excludes and marginalises that which it is not, ie. women, identified by her lack of phallus.

A good of example of this binarism is the construction of sexual difference that pervades our language. Active/passive, culture/nature, rational/emotional, hard/soft, masculine/ feminine, these dichotomies are inscribed with gendered meaning: they are the products of historical and ideological forces that underpin and legitimise women's subordination and oppression (Rutherford, 1990: 21).

According to Derrida the key for women in escaping the subordination and oppression of the phallic order lies in the deconstruction of these binaries. Derrida proposed a sophisticated form of deconstructionism, not involving any kind of opposition since this would reinforce the existing order, but by using 'hymenal' imagery to describe language (Nye, 1988: 186-189). "There is no phallic self-presence, no oppositional logic; instead the hymen is both difference and a celebrated union." (Ibid.: 188). Thus hymenal imagery symbolises both difference and union thereby deconstructing phallocentric binaries, not through opposition, but by disordering, rearranging and unbalancing the symbolic order (Ibid.: 189).

Irigaray was greatly influenced by the work of Derrida. She also did not attempt to oppose phallocentric binaries but sought instead to





deconstruct them. "The goal was not an unsatisfactory reversal of male/female positions, but a radical decentering of established meaning" (Nye, 1988: 194). Irigaray also recognised the central importance of phallogentric symbolism to establish meaning, and proposed a new symbolic order, vaginal symbolism.

The 'one' of the male subject becomes the two of the vaginal lips, constantly in touch with each other in an interaction in which the two are not separated by negation but interact and merge. The vagina is neither one or two but, two in one (Ibid.: 194).

Thus the vagina does not symbolise either oppression or negation but interaction, nor does it symbolise phallic singularity or binaric dualism, but combination by containing the two in the one.

The third and final theory proposing an alternative symbolic order is also the most complex and is put forward by Lichtenberg-Ettinger. Though influenced by Lacan, her reworking of his theories have produced something radically different. According to Lichtenberg-Ettinger 'the symbolic' not only encompasses the phallic but also the feminine. However, she does recognise that the feminine is repressed into the position of 'silent other'. She identifies two key terms: Matrix, and Metramorphosis, which she uses to describe the process by which the feminine can be expressed. 'Metramorphosis' is a neologism, "composed of Metra and Morpheus, ... a combined evocation of 'mater', the mother and the womb, and 'Morpheus', the Greek God of sleep and dreams" (Ducker, 1994:5).

An explanation of metramorphosis sees that each of the new forms and shapes of the Metramorphosis does not send the nature of each of the preceding ones into oblivion or even eliminate it, but lets it shine through the transparency, disarranges and leads an existence of multitude rather than unity (Huhn in Ducker, 1994: 5).





The matrix is the symbolic space which Lichtenberg-Ettinger has identified as suitable to account for the actions of the metamorphic processes. From my reading of Ducker's paper, it would seem that the matrix corresponds to what Freud described as the unconscious. The matrix is described as a prenatal "zone of encounter between the most intimate and the most distant unknown" (Ibid.: 5). Thus the matrix and the processes of metamorphosis are important in deconstructing phallic symbolism because they reference a pre-Oedipal time and space, ie. before awareness of sex determines possession or lack of phallus, and therefore a time and space not influenced by the phallic symbolic order. As each individual passes through the Oedipal stage of development the matrix is not lost but becomes "a shared space from which matrixial unities as well as phallic unities emerge" (Ibid.: 5).

I would suggest that the use of Morpheus would seem to reference the unconscious, since it would imply that the processes within the matrix relate, like the unconscious, to dreams. This would seem to be reiterated in Ducker's paper where metamorphic processes like dreams do not adhere to phallic, logical, progressive, binaric thought, "but which instead provide changes and transformations, not supplanting or deferring the signifier, but mutually altering the meaning they create" (Ibid.: 5).

Lichtenberg-Ettinger explains that while in the phallic stratum, binary oppositions are seen as 'normal' poles, while in the matrixial stratum these poles represent the extremes of one continuum (Ibid.: 6). Thus to conclude, "because the Matrix is a supplementary symbolic concept to the Phallus, it has a liberating and deconstructive effect on the limited modulations of a binary system of thought" (Ibid.: 7).



#### 5.4 Criticism of Derrida, Irigaray and Lichtenberg-Ettinger.

I will now look critically at each of the three alternative symbolic propositions. Though Derrida seems to object to women's subordination and oppression I think his use of hymenal imagery is unfortunate since within his theory "the hymen is both virginity and sexual intercourse" (Nye, 1988: 188). I would argue that this depiction of the hymen references patriarchal signification: its intactness deemed a woman pure and clean and suitable for marriage, a patriarchal invention to ensure paternity through the control of women's sexuality. If not intact, usually due to the intervention of a penis, a woman was deemed a harlot, unclean, only fit for male sexual release. Thus the hymen is an unsuitable alternative for the feminine since it already signifies phallic power.

Like Derrida, Irigaray references a specifically female physical characteristic, the vagina. Despite it being said that she does not wish to oppose the phallus, I can see two possible and equally unsatisfactory outcomes from using vaginal symbolism. The first would involve vaginal symbolism occupying a separate space, since by sharing a phallic space, it would be immediately interpreted by the phallic order as oppositional. As men and women do not exist in isolation, having two symbolic spaces does not correspond in any way to reality, therefore with regard to gender inequalities is irrelevant. Secondly, if vaginal symbolism did become the only symbolic order, a reverse phallocentrism would ensue. Men would be identified in terms of their lack, women by their possession of a vagina. Thus women would occupy the centre pushing men to the margins leading to "an unsatisfactory reversal of male/female positions" (Nye, 1988: 194).





Of the three propositions for an alternative symbolic order, I find Lichtenberg-Ettinger's has the most potential. She manages to include the phallus in her theory, which I believe to be the key to deconstructing phallocentrism. This may sound ironic, but by incorporating rather than opposing the phallus she is avoiding the trap of reinforcing phallocentric opposition. However I think the theory is flawed by its own complexity, making it inaccessible for general identification and therefore not easily assimilated into society.

### **5.5 Symbiotic Symbolism**

If a new symbolic order is the solution to gender inequalities it must incorporate symbols from both sexes. In 'prehistoric' times the source of life was represented by images of vagina and vulva. Later these symbols were replaced by the phallus when society came to believe that men were the source of life. Today we understand life to result from copulation, the coupling of both male and female sexual organs. I would suggest that a copulation symbol like the lingam/yoni (phallus/vagina) used in India since ancient times would be an excellent alternative to phallic symbolism.

In the sanctuary where it is worshipped, the lingam is represented surrounded by the female organ, the yoni...Universal energy, the substance of the world, is represented by the yoni, which grasps the lingam. It is only when the phallus...is surrounded by the yoni that God can manifest and the universe appear (Daniélou, 1993: 21).

I would like to call this new symbolism symbiotic symbolism since, within it the female and male are interdependent. By representing the creation of life as deriving from the union of the phallus and the vulva, one collapses phallocentric binaries into symbiotic complementaries. This symbolism reflects neither phallic singularity or binaric dualism,



but like Irigaray's vagina symbol, the 'two', phallus and vulva, in the 'one' symbiotic symbol.

With regard to male oppression, the collapsing of the phallogentric binary masculine/feminine, into a complementary 'masculine-feminine' in which both genders are equally valued, allows men and women to explore the entire continuum of human behaviour. Thus males and females are free to express the variation resulting from their chromosomes and hormones, which in turn leads to an enormous diversity of gender identities. In terms of men's sexual health, since the phallus no longer symbolises power, it is no longer necessary to deny phallic weakness. Thus the medical profession and individual men can admit to problems associated with the penis and initiate treatment.

I would anticipate that a number of individuals may experience difficulty with symbiotic symbolism. Victims of rape and incest would have difficulty interpreting a copulative symbol as positive. Within the phallogentric order this is true, since within copulation the phallus represents male power over the female. However within symbiotic symbolism power, value and status are derived through symbolic complementary interaction, not domination. Thus use of the phallus within rape and incest as a tool to express or experience power becomes obsolete.

Some people might describe symbiotic symbolism as heterosexist. First, I would suggest that since homosexuals, like everyone else, derive from this symbiotic union, at least in terms of their origin they can relate to it. Secondly, homosexual behaviour within symbiotic symbolism could simply be interpreted as natural variation, an example of the potential variety of gender identities.



Finally, many men operating within phallic oppositional symbolism will interpret symbiotic symbolism as meaning less power and less privelege. However I would suggest that power and privelege are not lessened, they simply are no longer oppositional. Men would no longer signify power and privelege within the binary phallus/lack-of; however, men *and* women could signify power and privelege within the union of the symbiotic symbol. Thus male power and privelege is not lessened, but signified differently.





## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have used the concept of patriarchy to explore the relationship between gender identity and inequality. By comparing essentialist and non-essentialist theories, I have concluded that though innate factors do influence behaviour, they do not explain the dichotomy of gender identities in which these inequalities manifest. It is my contention that gender identities are constructed through the process of socialisation within patriarchal symbolic order. Within patriarchal society phallic symbolism has led to the construction of a binaric system, where the binary opposition phallus/lack-of, operating in a system of social signification, signifies male power and privelege and female lack of power and privelege.

Despite signifying power and privelege, through the examples of transvestism, transsexualism and men's health I have demonstrated that the rigidity of gender stereotypes which ensue has led to male oppression and serious health risks for men.

In order to escape this phallic oppression I have proffered an alternative symbolism which through generating a new symbolic order by collapsing patriarchal oppositions into 'complementaries' allows a variety of gender identities of equal importance.



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