

TALKING THE WALK, *The Grassroots Language of Feminism*

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Not My Metaphor

Woman in ancient society was the truth sayer, the one who strips away hypocrisy, the keeper of the collective conscience. Her presence inhibited the puffing of others' vanities. If that means saying the emperor has no clothes, so be it.

Miriam Horn, *Rebels in White Gloves*

The Emperor Has No Clothes? What's the point of that? Everybody's pretending about a guy who's pretending; kowtowing to a totally deluded megalomaniac. This is a story about a metaphor—told as a metaphor. Which is a good metaphor about the historical relationship between women and men. The problem is, that since women have discovered that they have their own minds and stories, the standards for metaphor no longer apply.

But we're still caught in the myth of the surface of the male character. We're explicitly told—and we implicitly understand—that we're supposed to pretend that we don't know what you can't face about yourselves. We convey our fake blindness in acceptable affirmations, told in acceptable styles, in acceptable discussions. So merrily we go along, making you feel at home with your inadequacies and limitations, to keep some kind of alleged civility going. No clothes? Save face? There's not even an emperor!

As women are changing their attitudes about ourselves, we are not translating this into reducing the power and influence of the male tale. We're still in the subordinate mode, acting as if men think we don't have the right to increased influence. As though it would be wrong to approach the entire topic from our own angle.

The male metaphor, in its sexist construction, protects the authority of the Dominant Voice. Its purpose—or value—is to prevent the shape and constitution of men's vision from shifting. There is a change in the volume of a certain aspect of content, however. Women are now weighting the story in terms of what is done to us by men, but little progress has been made in dismantling the iconic male stereotype. All we get in this era of more massive, mass media is a greater sampling of bigger and better socio-and-psychopaths which is simply a logical increase in the quantity of bad quality.

I saw a short film recently—*Montreal vu par...*, by Denys Arcand—which exemplifies the rules of male metaphor. A man and woman are in a crowded arena at a hockey game, during which she announces she is leaving him, after

forty-six years of marriage. She walks out of the rink, and though reluctant to tear himself away from the action on the ice, he follows her to get an explanation. She tells him, that after a lifetime of servitude and pain caused by his indifference, her decision to leave has been precipitated by his insistence upon jumping on her bones, a week after she has returned home from the hospital after an operation for cancer. "I don't know much about women's things," is his excuse. The subtext implies that in the time she has left to live, she's opting to rejoin the human race. In solitude or community, whatever life brings, it will be an improvement over living with the burden of a chronic case of male failure and obtuseness.

When are men going to finish this scenario? The question mark is the metaphor. The unfinished or unexplored scenario is the issue inside the question mark. Let me restate this theme: men tell the human race about their own values and emotions and how they think women perceive them, in light of why they don't want to talk about any of it.

It's not that I don't understand these male peculiarities. Indeed, they are not without features of compelling interest. It's that I find them ultimately stupid and unacceptable. No impulse to move on characterizes the dominant male narrative, which is, of course, what makes it a lie. There is always an impulse to speak the truth; ergo I do not accept this muteness. I don't accept the hypocrisy—your face is no more important than mine. I don't accept the smallness of your self-awareness. Admitting your resistance to self-knowledge would open up a whole new world. Should you make the leap, don't use storytelling formula 101, and forget the "boy struggles with adversity and is transformed" bit. Actually, forget boys, period.

And I don't accept that women have to take up the slack in the male character and embody it as her own. Go ahead, tell me about your ego problems. But as for more chicanery, couched in the language of psycho- or any other -logy, forget it. Fess up. Come clean. Get real. You are not reflecting back the perceptions of your own changed reality. Yes, women's liberation has had an effect on you. Instead of grappling with it, you remain cocooned in your own self-aggrandizing mythology.

I want to know what this dork at the hockey game knows about himself, and what the storyteller is concealing, and why. It's not good enough to say "I don't understand women." Why not? What's your problem? Push the envelope. If there's nothing there, say so—but in the context of reality, which means living life in a world with women. Then tell me how you got this nothing and how you managed to pawn it off in exchange for forty-six years of a woman's life. Then tell me fellas, exactly what is it that you're protecting, inside your metaphors within metaphors. Which are not my metaphors. But don't tell me the emperor has no clothes.

Ah yes, the emperor. . . . So here you have a metaphor for self-aggrandizing men, buried in the metaphor of public approbation, transforming itself into a myth that allows us to claim the moral high ground, by setting up imaginary camp in the courageous metaphorical fellow who has the balls to say, "Dude, you're not wearing anything." This story is part and parcel of the arch-myth called the male mystique—that incredible delusion about male invincibility. Which is not my mystery.

Traversing the realm of myth into the real of actuality, I disabuse myself of the fictions of male magic. I distinguish between what is universal and what is personal. The universal is That Thing (the historical consciousness of the superiority of the male), which everybody senses but can't quite put their finger on. The personal is you, fella; your fraudulent "male legitimacy," that everybody knows about and is afraid to talk about.

What I define as the interweaving double bind of patriarchal ideology and practice, is to men, the guardians of the mystique, their implicit but unsubstantiated relationship to power, which explicitly shows up as the male establishment and its assumptions which, valid or not, exist as pressure. You exert it. I feel it.

End Excerpt "Not My Metaphor"