

# 'We Had to Destroy the Hamlet in Order to Save It': Creation and Destruction in the Masculine Psyche

The papers collected in this issue relate almost solely to aspects of working with men. It is, in fact, the first time that the topic has been featured as such within the pages of this *Journal*. That in itself is a statement about the ambiguous place the masculine occupies in family therapy, and indeed, in that whole sector of our culture which sees itself as socially progressive. Is it an advance to devote an issue to males and the problems they engender? Or is it a backhanded way of restoring the centrality of men and male issues, a 'patriarchal backlash'? What can one write about in an issue of a family therapy journal devoted to men?

Overwhelmingly, it would seem, one can write about male violence towards women and children, and how it might be prevented or limited: Jean-Pierre Menagé, Robert Russell and Maxwell Jory, and James McGregor all explore aspects of intervention with men who are violent. But one can also write about the constrained nature of male sexuality, which often restricts the pleasure available to both men and their partners (a topic taken up by Penny Roughan). And about the anger and bitterness of the man whose 'rights' have been taken from him by the Family Court (Peter K. Jordan, Keith Sedgman). All of these things are important, and deserve the thoughtful exploration that they receive here. They are also issues that have become politically 'loaded', and readers will notice honest self-reflection on the part of some authors in this issue, commendable at a time when debate over male violence has become dangerously polarised.

That debate extends even to the Reviews section and Network News, where the current controversy over Robin and Bud Wileman's self-help text, *How to Stop Domestic Violence: A Victim's Guide* is at the centre of the storm. The book has attracted strong opposition, and even forms of censorship in some quarters. This *Journal* takes the position that controversial ideas should be openly explored, questioned and defended. Naturally, those who work with women suffering violence at the hands of men, and those who work with the men responsible for that violence, feel strongly about the most appropriate way to approach the issue. However, the spirit of family therapy enjoins us to view such debates in an even broader context than the profession has consistently invoked.

The wider context for domestic violence is the violence sanctioned by society as a whole: school bullying, imprisonment, inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred, the

'punishing' of those who are different in any way, and, especially, the state-licensed murder that we call 'war'. Some forms of violence appear to be sociobiologically rooted in primitive 'us-and-them' instincts that are felt and acted out by women as well as men. However, no sane person would deny that it is men who characteristically take these forms of violence to horrific extremes, and this prompts us to look within the masculine psyche for the key to understanding destructive behaviour.

It was Nancy Chodorow, some twenty years ago now, who provided us with a creative revision and extension of psychoanalytic developmental theory as it related to gender. Girls' sense of physiological similarity to their mothers—while it may easily enough become problematic—most often functions as a source of pride and security: 'this body, which came out of this body'. By contrast, boys need to 'turn away' from their mothers in order to feel securely 'male'. Their bodies are different from the bodies that gave them life, and their bodies do not contain the potential for the reproduction of mothering. Boys at some level 'know' that they will never undergo the pain, fear and joy of childbirth. Chodorow sees the male 'turn-away' as a crucial source of male insecurity, the pervading sense of exclusion and difference that many men feel when honest with themselves, but which is typically cloaked under the arrogance of patriarchy.

Speaking of the birth of her children, one of my students recently said, 'I've been through *psychic death!*' She said it jokingly, but she wasn't really joking. Men do not have this experience through childbirth, so instead they create substitutes. Denied a sense of direct participation in their own reproduction, men are driven to achievement, to workaholism, to sexual conquest and, most of all, to war. Of course, weapons are at one level simply phallic, but as Jean Elshtain elegantly demonstrated, at a deeper level, bombs and missiles are described by the men who create them in terms strongly reminiscent of childbearing. The symbolic meaning of weaponry contrasts markedly with the actual use that soldiers make of it: in figures that have never to my knowledge been seriously challenged, Marshall in *Men Against Fire* found that only one quarter of US combat troops in World War Two would admit to firing directly at an approaching enemy, with intent to kill. The rest deliberately aimed to miss, or to wound only. The vast majority of men do not love to kill, even when killing is socially sanctioned by their uniform, and the night terrors and self laceration suffered by

the men who returned from Vietnam confirm that they do so only at enormous cost to their sense of basic human decency. No wonder it is so vital that men who go to war feel that they have a 'cause'.

Yet precisely because of the deep fear and radical self challenge it involves, war itself remains a mass-produced male substitute for childbirth, offering those who participate in it a sense of having been part of a powerful but ineffable experience, an encounter with death and (for those who survive) a rebirth into life. As we have seen, men go to war, in part, because they believe in 'rights', a 'cause'. But ideals and principles die as suffering destroys meaning, and the 'baby' that is ultimately born of war is simply the experience of having been there and survived, symbolised in the 'gongs' men earn and wear with mingled pride and grief for the rest of their lives. Veterans even wear their medals on the left side of their chest—and, as another of my students perceptively pointed out, it is the left breast that, in women, is traditionally depicted as the one against which a baby is held.

How does all this relate to male violence? Men, as feminist thinkers have shown us, tend to value principles (including 'rights') over relationships. When relationship fails, when the woman to whom they have entrusted their vulnerability seems to let them down, men typically express their sense of betrayal and fear as destructive anger. Their sense of entitlement becomes the 'cause' for which they will now 'fight'. Faced with the loss of their woman (and hence, perhaps, of their mother?) some men follow the warped logic of war: *if I destroy her, I possess her, because then nobody else can have her*. They convert the person into an idea, a principle. And so the gun outside the Family Court, the murder-suicide in the suburban home. It is what Keith Sedgman, in this issue, calls 'The Samson solution'. Ponder the memorably crazy words of that American officer in Vietnam: 'we had to destroy the hamlet in order to save it'. The logic is the same. The maiming and killing of other men becomes 'glory'. The taking of one's own life becomes 'honour'.

Apply the same insights from Chodorow in a different way. If men have to 'turn away' from the bliss of infant oneness with their mothers, does not the intensity of their denial show how strong their need for it is? And is it not often true that the same men who are violent to their partners are most childishly dependent upon them for emotional security? Why else do they find it impossible to keep away from a separated partner, even when they know rationally that by pursuing her, they will drive her even further away? James McGregor's account of his evolving work with violent men highlights the power of the appeal to relationship, to connectedness, as a bridge between male therapist and male client. Keith Sedgman's 'Cutting Grass' again widens the context, pinpointing the ways that men's behaviour in Australia today is in part a product of a particular history—a history that has reproduced and reinforced the experience of alienation that almost all males experience individually within the family.

The feminist critique of patriarchy has served us well, but it has made it very difficult for some to work

therapeutically with men, particularly with those whose behaviour exemplifies the 'logic of war'. Male therapists, especially, often feel at a disadvantage with such clients, torn between wanting to join them as males, and yet needing to guard themselves against the possibility of being seen as 'collusive', 'soft on violence' or 'oppressive to women'. Too often, in today's therapeutic community, it has become dangerous for both men and women to be fully honest about these private conflicts—yet, as the recent movie of *The Crucible* reminds us, political correctness imposes simplistic solutions on complex problems, and exacts a heavy price from those who dare to tell their truth.

We need to remember, too, that the feminist-inspired movement against domestic violence is part of a wider revaluing of violence, a move to abandon violence totally as a means of resolving conflict. This wider shift in human values is still in its infancy, its active manifestations less than a century old, though its ideological foundations were laid earlier. The century of wars has also been the century of peace—peace as a conscious project, not a mere by-product of economic prosperity or political balances of power. In expecting humankind to abandon violence, we are attempting something enormous, unprecedented. We are attempting to change something that has been part of humanity from the very beginning, something that has been part of most cultures, even, so far as we can understand, those that predated patriarchy: 'destroying life in order to save it' is also the logic of the human sacrifices that made the corn grow.

It may be too early yet to suggest that we might cautiously move into reframing and celebrating particular things that men do well. The work of the Mythopoeic Men's Movement has, controversially, sought to reframe some traditional masculine concepts and principles. It is unfortunate that in practice, Bly's *Iron John* (re-reviewed in this issue by Peter Mark) seems to have become identified with small groups of SNAGs beating drums in the bush, or with popularised anthropology, which misleadingly suggests that all traditional societies 'teach boys to be men' in ritual ways that enable them to escape the contradictions of masculinity in our own culture (Smith, 1996). We need to find ways of appreciating men, if we are ever to help them adjust to a new concept of heroism, and a new sense of adequacy, in a postpaleolithic, postfeudal world.

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#### References

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