

# Men get firsts, women get seconds

## Adult therapies, student dreams

JANET SAYERS

**ABSTRACT** Why do men get firsts and women get seconds? This question is currently being debated by some in Oxford University, but not elsewhere, where men's educational under-achievement – in secondary-school league tables, for instance (see, e.g., Phillips 1993) – is more often a matter of concern. Stephen Frosh (1998) has considered both issues in terms of the way young men are constructed and construct themselves through performing and acting on prevailing stereotypes about men and masculinity. These stereotypes include recklessness, not caution, which Maryanne Martin (1998) says contributes to men getting firsts at Oxford by virtue of this trait being rewarded by Oxford University's tutorial and examination system.

In the following pages I too will talk about the equation of men with recklessness. Or, more accurately, I will talk about the way in which men and women act on nightmares and dreams that often glorify men, not least as reckless heroes, in large part because, despite the gains of feminism, glory is still more often men's than women's prerogative in male-dominated society, of which Oxford University is a prime example. I too will consider how this might contribute to men more often getting firsts, and to women more often getting seconds in finals in Oxford. I will end with some implications of my findings for therapy – at least, for the kind of therapy I do as a Freudian therapist. I will therefore begin with Freud.

**KEYWORDS** Freud, nightmares, dreams, feminism, examinations, therapy, separation, loss, depression, Lacan, psychoanalysis, teenagers, mothers, fathers, gender, fantasy, adolescence

## FREUD AND MEMORIES OF YOUTH

Freud once famously noted that women and men seeking therapy suffer primarily from reminiscences – from memories of actual events and of nightmares and dreams by which they seek to adapt to, and defend against, the conflict of unconscious fantasy with consciously perceived reality. He described, for instance, his 18-year-old patient, Dora, suffering from memories of being sexually harassed by her father's friend, Herr K, from a remembered recurring childhood nightmare of being in a burning house, and from a remembered recent dream of her father being dead and her mother, somewhat grudgingly, inviting her to come home. Freud also described a 23-year-old patient, now known as the Wolf Man, suffering from the memory of seeing his parents making love – his father penetrating his mother from behind so he could see she had no penis. He also suffered from a childhood nightmare of being threatened by wolves with big tails and ears pricked up like those of dogs.

But what are today's young people's remembered nightmares and dreams? To answer this question I recently arranged for first-year undergraduates and for pupils attending two, parallel, single-sex, state secondary schools anonymously to write down in their lectures and classes their best remembered recurring childhood and recent dreams. This resulted in over 350 scripts. The dreams they contain are, of course, restricted to the 'manifest content' of what their writers chose to remember and write. Nevertheless some of their dreams are highly illuminating regarding differences between young women and men bearing on the problems contributing to examination fever, and on the problems for which many people seek therapy. One difference concerns men's fantasies of separation, persecution and heroic grandiosity.

## SEPARATION, PERSECUTION AND HEROICS

Several of the young men in my study told recurring childhood nightmares of being separated from their mothers. A 17-year-old wrote:

I used to have a dream about being separated from my mother as she was taking me to school. There was always a very strong sense of loss in this dream – it was particularly vivid, and at the same time quite frightening. It was a dream that reoccurred [sic] very frequently for some time.

(Sayers 1998: 24).

## MEN GET FIRSTS, WOMEN GET SECONDS

Young men more often than young women wrote recurring childhood nightmares of being separate and alone. Another 17-year-old wrote:

I used to have this recurring dream until I was about 10. . . . There was no story . . . it was more of an image, a sensation, it was unpleasant. I could see waves, not necessarily sea waves, but they were often like that. They created a horrible, distressing distance between myself and the object of the dream I was having.

Students from the boys' school also often took refuge from their nightmares of distance, separation and aloneness in dreams of being heroes in sports and sex. A 14-year-old wrote a recurring childhood nightmare of being isolated in a desert, far from family and friends. He then went on to write of his best remembered recent dream:

There was crowds and crowds of people. I was playing tennis against André Agassi and Pete Sampras at the same time. They didn't win a point. And I won. The grass tennis court was bright green and the crowd cheered me.

(Sayers 1998: 118–19)

Another 14-year-old started with:

A nightmare where you are in darkness, alone, in the middle of nowhere, with a massive army all around you that approach you slowly, some people on horses, all heavily armed with swords, axes, shields, but just when they reach you and are about to kill you, the dream starts all over again.

He then got away from this nightmare of darkness, aloneness, and of being threatened by men about to kill him. He wrote of himself glorying in sex:

My most recent memorable dream, which occurs over and over again, is where I start at a party, with lots of really nice girls, and they all really fancy me and aren't afraid to show it. . . . Then two of them follow me home, and I shag them out and they give me a blow job.

(Sayers 1998: 119–20)

Others combined glory in sex and sports. Another 14-year-old wrote of his dreams:

I had won a competition and become a millionaire and bought all the things I ever wanted. [Recently] I dreamt that I was playing cricket for England and got 600 runs and 19 wickets in the match and we won and I became world famous and married Michelle Pfeiffer.

(Sayers 1998: 119)

What do young women dream? Do they dream the same? Not according to my findings.

### CLOSENESS, FAILING TO PLEASE, BEING SAVED

No young woman in my sample told a dream of being glorious in sex or sports. As for their nightmares, whereas men wrote nightmares of being separated from their mothers, women wrote nightmares of their mothers and other female figures being all too horribly close. Strikingly emblematic of this terror is the following dream of a 12-year-old. She wrote:

I am on a giant web and there is a giant spider coming towards me. She is smiling but as she gets nearer she lets out a horrible scream, so high it hurts my ears. She becomes scary and ugly. She gets really close to me and I am stuck on the web unable to move. She looks like she is going to kill me and then she scuttles back to the beginning, puts on a smile, and it begins again. It goes on for ages.

(Sayers 1998: 67)

Others wrote nightmares of longing to get away. A 16-year-old wrote:

My Mum would be sitting on the top of my cupboards, amongst my teddy bears, and I would be in bed trying to sleep. But she would be shouting down at me with a red face, whilst a bird mobile I used to have hanging from my lampshade would be swinging round violently, because the birds were alive, and trying to escape.

While young men in my sample took refuge from their nightmares of separation and aloneness in dreams of being heroes in sports and sex, girls took refuge from their nightmares of hostile closeness in dreams of men gloriously saving them. A 17-year-old wrote:

Everyone is playing with their friends except for me who is being bullied. Suddenly this boy (like Peter Pan) comes out of the sky and gives me magic flying dust. I tie all of the bullies to the goalposts and fly off to the clouds.

(Sayers 1998: 137)

A 13-year-old wrote a nightmare of being imprisoned by her teacher:

[In] my most memorable dream from when I was younger . . . I can remember being naughty and the teacher tied me to a chair and self-taped my mouth. All the other children laughed at me and called me names.

She then went on to write:

I had a dream last night . . . I was sentenced to seven years in prison. I was given one day to say goodbye to all my friends . . . [then] all the boys came around the corner . . . I embraced them all and especially one at the end called Simon (I fancy him in real life) he asked if I wanted to go into town . . . So we walked off hand in hand to a coffee shop . . . it had chandeliers.

A 13-year-old wrote a recurring nightmare of:

Being in the kitchen [in the house where she lived alone with her mother] and putting something in the sink and feeling something crawl over my foot. I look down and see a massive spider, its eyes are like this: ☉☉.

Then she got away. Her next dream was of being outside, of pleasing her schoolmaster. He saves her self-esteem by making her the object of his glorious, quasi-regal regard. She wrote that in her dream:

I am sitting on the roadside and a car keeps driving past me. I look into the window and see Mr Jenkins, my history teacher. He sees me and grins and waves slowly, like the Queen. This continues for a long time.

(Sayers 1998: 137)

Still another teenager – a 14-year-old – told a recurring nightmare of drowning engulfment with her family:

There was a submarine and inside was my sisters and me . . . as we were moving through the water everything seemed to go black and all of a sudden we would be drowning.

She followed this with a recent dream in which she looked to men glorified and idealized on the horizon. She wrote that in her dream:

The waves were engulfing me but I couldn't see or hear them. Every few minutes I would turn round and Tom would be standing there, then I would turn again but see nothing. (Other times Kurt Cobain would be there.)

In sum: the above examples illustrate a sex difference in which young women look to men idealized in the distance – to Kurt Cobain or to their 'Mr Jenkins' teachers – to save them from engulfing closeness with their mothers and others. Meanwhile young men look to be these ideal figures, and to emulate and better them – André Agassi, Pete Sampras and so on.

## MEN'S FIRSTS, WOMEN'S SECONDS

The above examples concern secondary-school students. What about university students? The following two examples from my survey of first-year undergraduates' dreams are particularly germane to the issue of men getting firsts, women getting seconds.

The first example comes from a young man, aged 19, who wrote

I can distinctly feel I'm being pursued by the enemy cavalry. I, of course, am a knight in armour, big sword and everything. . . . [I] come to this large castle . . . get through . . . [and] I, the knight in the dream, was actually laughing at the faces of the very frustrated enemy cavalry who couldn't get through . . . [in my most recent dream] we were taking the plane . . . piloted by my Italian professor . . . who actually performed impressive acrobatics to his thrilled and scared passengers. . . . We pass over a motorway on which there had been a huge crash.

The second example comes from a 19-year-old woman who wrote of her best remembered recurring dream

I was very small in the dream, and it seemed like I was in a giant world. (Mr Small in Mr Tall's house.) Everything was very quiet. There was no sound at all, but the quietness itself seemed very loud, deafening and very Large [sic]. I seemed to be shrinking and everything around me just kept getting larger and looming over me. The silence also seemed to grow louder, and echoed in my ears. I remember feeling very frightened and panicky in my dream.

I tell these dreams because both students happened to volunteer their names, from which I have been able to determine their finals results: the man with his dream of daredevil recklessness got a first; the woman with her dream of shrinking panic got an upper second. In this their results are in keeping with data recently reported in the *Oxford Magazine* in which the greater frequency of men compared to women getting firsts at Oxford and elsewhere is attributed to men being more ready to take risks (see, e.g., Spear 1997; Smithers 1998) and to examiners being more ready to reward students for risk taking (Spear 1998) and 'bullshitting', as one report puts it (Mellanby and Rawlins 1997: 2).

This is consistent with the fact that from infancy onwards boys are encouraged to take risks, to be bold, courageous, to opt for heroics and to be brilliant. They are rewarded for doing so. Girls, by contrast, are encouraged to please and not to show off or brag. It is little surprise, therefore, that in finals women seek to please while men seek to be brilliant. But this comes at a cost. As

the above-quoted first-year male undergraduate's dream indicates, being brilliant carries with it the threat of a crash. It is also associated with laughing contempt, and with being scared.

Students in my secondary-school sample told nightmares similarly linking crashing with dreaming of glory. Particularly striking in this respect was the dream of a 14-year-old who wrote:

I dreamt I had become a member of a really big rock/grunge band and that I was really rich and all our records had gone platinum. I was in the middle of singing the song called '4th of July' by Soundgarden which is about the end of the world when everything in the song came true. The floor opened and engulfed everything and everyone except me and I was left alone on a completely deserted Earth.

(Sayers 1998: 140)

Others told nightmares of glory turning to failure. One boy dreamt of 'missing an open goal in Holland against Germany in the European Cup'. A 12-year-old dreamt of winning Wimbledon and collecting the trophy only to be rewarded by a man machine-gunning him down. A 14-year-old dreamt he was in a rock group when the screaming girls' adulation of him turned into them beating him up.

Teenage girls, by contrast, wrote nightmares not of crashing but of failing to please. A 13-year-old told a recurring nightmare in which:

Every night before my birthday this fat lady would walk up to me . . . carrying a pair of boots . . . [and] say 'You don't deserve these boots'. And I would always be sad.

A 15-year-old wrote a recent dream in which:

my boss forgot to get my wages, so she made me run to her house and then I came back with it. When I opened it there was no money. There was a note saying that my work was not good enough and that she never wanted to see me again. I ran home crying.

(Sayers 1998: 73)

Freud wrote of similar nightmares. He wrote of young women's nightmares of being no good, of being too small and inferior. He wrote of young men's nightmares of their grandiosity crashing, of losing their manhood, of patriarchal figures persecuting them with threats of castration. He wrote of both sexes being beset by dreams and nightmares of their fathers as inspiring and terrifying superego figures.

Freud, of course, was writing many years ago. Nevertheless dreams and nightmares of men as superego giants still persist, as I have

sought to illustrate, and as I will illustrate with two anecdotal examples regarding finals involving myself and a close relative. In my second year at university I was so terrified of failing to please my giant-seeming examiners that I took tranquilizers to numb me to what was going on. Some decades later my close relative, a young man in his late teens, was also terrified in his second year at university. He was torn between dreams of proving himself a genius, and nightmares of being quite the reverse. His college tutors telling him he was indeed brilliant was no help. It simply contributed to and reinforced his nightmares of crashing.

What then is to be done?

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY

Better, I suggest, not to reinforce but to expose as fantasy the dreams and nightmares of men as brilliant giants dominating our waking as well as our sleeping lives. I will illustrate the point with two therapy examples bearing on this theme. I will call the patients involved Lisa and Len. Both arrived in therapy still haunted by teenage nightmares of failing – Len of failing to be the great man he had imagined himself to be through childhood and adolescence, Lisa of failing to live up to the grand ideals she imagined her men demanded she embody.

#### Len

I shall begin with Len. He is an architect. He first came into therapy when he was in his mid-30s. An architect colleague had suggested he might find therapy helpful in enabling him to get out of the rut he was in both in his work and at home. At least that was what Len initially told me.

Like many men, he went on to tell a story of himself that began with early separation from his mother. In his case the separation had been total. His mother died when he was 13. Her loss reminded him of other losses: of the death of his older sister in childbirth when he was 9; and of the loss of his father when he remarried a year after Len's mother died.

At some level Len worried that he might have contributed to these losses. More often, however, any depression and guilt he might have felt about damaging and contributing to the loss of those he loved was obscured by his taking refuge, since his mother's death, in an

image of himself as the saviour of everyone in his family. He took his father under his wing. He patronized him. At school he triumphed over all upset by becoming a 'big deal' artist. He also became a Don Juan. Seducing women into crediting him with being the perfect lover kept at bay the discreditable hatred as well as love of his mother and others which it emerged he had unconsciously felt at losing them through their dying. Sex, he told me, is 'fuck off' to death.

It was the same with his politics. He recalled a dream of his car being boxed in when he was visiting a friend, and of his saving the day by giving the lads a loudspeaker. It was his solution to being 'boxed in' by closeness with, dependence on and fear of losing those he loved. Rise above it all. Speechify. That was the motto impelling him to become a demagogue student activist. It had similarly impelled him to become a 'wild cannon' and 'maverick' at work. It was the same with his girlfriend. Just as he had grandly taken his father under his wing when his mother died, he grandly took his girlfriend under his wing. But this made him contemptuous of her for being beholden to him.

It was the same with me. He despised me. He had no time for my trade. He bad-mouthed psychoanalysis as endless talk of 'murderousness and death'. He dismissed therapy with a two-finger gesture of contempt. He called it 'furtive'. He likened me to the fool who, going to the theatre, hangs up what little intellect he has along with his hat in the cloakroom outside. The idea came from Brecht. Brecht, he told me, assuming I was too ignorant to know, was a playwright.

He short-changed me. He told me it was my fault, that I must have made a mistake in calculating his bill. He resented paying. Anyway, why should he? He was 'a special case', too important to be bothered with humdrum money matters. He had no need of me. Rather I needed him. He spoke of my being lost without him when his work stopped him attending one of his appointments.

Slowly, however, his attitude changed. Cracks began to appear. Faced with losing me over the Christmas break, he told a nightmare

Mr Bouverie [a senior partner in his firm] and I were having Christmas lunch. But there was only very measly turkey legs. We asked for some more and got some wine. But I lost the turkey leg. I woke up looking for it.

His losing his 'measly turkey leg' was a striking contrast to his previous inflated image of himself as having the phallus, as the Freudian analyst Jacques Lacan (e.g. 1958) might have put it. His

dream reminded him of his car. It was a crock, he told me. He dreaded being the same. He felt persecuted. He remembered a recurring dream of a clown chasing him, of tearing off his mask, and of his 'livid' hatred of him.

He despaired of feeling love, or of taking in anything good. All he took in, he said, was bad – cigarettes and beer. He was preoccupied with bad people, with the killers of 2-year-old Jamie Bulger. He became depressed lest, contrary to his former grand image of himself, he was a failure. He worried he would be 'dethroned' and 'dispensed' with. A memory came back of losing his father, when he was 8, in a crowded supermarket.

No longer escaping memories of the reality of loss and separation into dreams of being the saviour he had long imagined himself to be, he began to face other realities. These included the reality of having to work to become the good son, lover, and architect he had previously thought he already was in his precarious and easily toppled illusion of himself as hero and genius.

### Lisa

My second example concerns Lisa. She was a jazz musician in her late 30s when she was referred for NHS therapy on account of her complete loss of confidence following the breakdown of her latest relationship. She began by regaling me with her teenage memory of her mother as 'useless' and 'a nervous wreck'. She was frightened that she was similarly useless and might fail to please. Talking of her nightmares, she said:

There was a dream I used to have as a child – witches holding a market in the back garden. I knew something bad would happen. . . . I have anxiety dreams now about cooking – about the shops shutting – and I haven't got the things I need.

She described nightmares of being ensnared and enveloped by her mother's depression and oppression.

On the other hand, she also told me of the glorious stories her father used to tell her – of saving her from her mother by the two of them running away to become free-as-air buskers. Years later, in therapy with me, she still wore the motley garb of the wandering minstrel. To this she had added the accretions of whatever else her father and the men who took his place, including her current boyfriend, seemingly most wanted her to be as the price of saving her from crippling identification with her mother. She had taught

herself chess to be the sparring partner her father wanted to prove himself 'champion of the world . . . of the universe even'. She had learnt Latin and Greek to please one of her boyfriends. She became a financial wizard to please another. She pretended to the passionate feelings her current boyfriend seemingly most wanted her to feel.

She summarized her lot in terms of a folk tale, 'Patient Esmeralda'. It comes from Boccaccio and concerns a downtrodden peasant woman who is saved from abjection by passing each of a succession of tests a king sets her to ensure she meets the standard he requires to make her his queen. Lisa said her lack of confidence was chiefly due to her dread lest she fail the tests her current boyfriend set her. She had a nightmare of her father returning from the dead to dismiss her as no good, just as he had dismissed her mother when Lisa was a teenager. In her dream her father denounced her, saying, 'So that's what it's come to. You never did do anything. Just ordinary and middle-aged.'

She wanted to please me just as she wanted to please him. She read my books to make herself the patient I might most want her to be. But then she hated me for seemingly squeezing this confession out of her, for having 'the last laugh' as she felt her father had had over her. She sobbed that whatever she did would be done to please me, that nothing felt real, that she was just a hollow 'sham', an empty shell, that she could never please others or be any good.

She felt divided between feeling she could and could not please me. I too felt divided. I felt divided between feeling full up with her stories of pleasing her men and feeling empty at there being no substance to what she said. Perhaps that was why alongside the warmth and brilliance of her talk I often felt inwardly shivery and cold as though it were I, not her, who, with her thin clothes and play-acted veneer, had nothing to warm me inside.

Perhaps it was my containing these divided feelings – including feeling both her coldness and warmth – that enabled her to take these feelings back into herself as containable and contained. Perhaps it was her sharing her divided feelings as they arose in therapy with me that contributed to her retelling her story to include her mother not only as a hated and useless incompetent from whom she had wanted to be saved by her father and by a succession of other men. Now she also began to remember and experience her mother as loved as well as hated – as someone good, reliable and down-to-earth within her.

This in turn led her to feel confident of doing good herself. She worked on a jazz improvisation on the theme of 'London Bridge is falling down'. It was a fitting epitaph to the monument she had previously sought to make of herself as phallus – to use Lacan's (1958) term – to please her men. With the crumbling of this phallic monument she became less plagued by terror of not pleasing others. Her present of her jazz composition marked the end of her therapy. It also marks the end of this article. What, in sum, have I been trying to say?

### CONCLUSION

I have been arguing that the solution to women's nightmares of failing to please and of men's nightmares of their glory crashing depends on facing and exposing, rather than reinforcing, the male-centred fantasies that are often involved. Politically this has led to the feminist struggle to bring about a less male-dominated and more sexually equal world, not least in universities like Oxford. In Freudian terms it involves exposing and deconstructing women's and men's nightmares and dreams and prevailing dominant discourses of masculinity and recklessness, as Stephen Frosh, Maryanne Martin and I sought to do in talks to the recent Oxford University Counselling Service's Annual Conference, 'Learning, Gender and Sexuality'. This is necessary as part of the process of re-working the conflict of the conscious and unconscious fantasies and realities contributing to men's and women's ills, including exam fever.

To return to the examples of myself and my close relative. He discovered that he had to face and deconstruct his exciting and inspiring but also all too fallible image of himself as a genius in doing finals. He had to calm down his grandiosity to get down to the dreary, mundane and laborious process of learning his subject, and the peculiarities of his subject's exam system at Oxford. For me, as I understand it in retrospect, getting down to doing finals meant facing and deconstructing my second-year thrilling but terrifying image of my supervisors and examiners as giants. It meant applying myself to the humdrum business of learning the details of my subject, experimental psychology. It also meant checking out my nightmares against reality. I arranged to have supervisions with one of the all-male team of examiners. Learning first-hand from being taught by him of his theories and work gave me the confidence both to write about it and to risk taking issue with it in finals.

In the very last exam I criticized his theories in terms of those of Ronnie Laing. His book, *The Divided Self* (1959), and its account of the implications for treating psychiatric problems in young people has been a major inspiration of my work on the adult repercussions of adolescence. It was also in large part the inspiration of the study from which I have drawn the above examples in seeking to answer both the question with which I began and its implications for therapy with which I ended.

*Janet Sayers, Professor of Psychoanalytic Psychology and  
Psychotherapist, Dept of Sociology, Darwin College,  
University of Kent and Canterbury,  
Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NY*

#### NOTE

My thanks to Alex Coren and everyone involved in the Oxford University Counselling Service for asking me to contribute the talk, on which this paper is based, to its annual conference in St Catherine's College, Oxford, on 26 June 1998.

#### REFERENCES

- Frosh, S. (1998) 'Performance, identification and loss: the emergence of gendered identities', contribution to Oxford University Counselling Service's Conference 'Learning, Gender and Sexuality', St Catherine's College, 26 June.
- Lacan, J. (1958) 'The signification of the phallus', in *Ecrits*, London: Tavistock, 1977.
- Laing, R.D. (1959) *The Divided Self*, London: Tavistock.
- Martin, M. (1998) 'Gender differences in examination anxiety and imagery amongst Oxford University students', contribution to Oxford University Counselling Service's Conference, 'Learning Gender and Sexuality', St Catherine's College, 26 June.
- Mellanby, J.H. and Rawlins, J.N.P. (1997) 'The gender gap: the case of PPP', *Oxford Magazine*, Eighth Week, Trinity Term, p.2.
- Phillips, A. (1993) *The Trouble with Boys*, London: HarperCollins.
- Sayers, J. (1998) *Boy Crazy: Remembering Adolescence, Therapies and Dreams*, London: Routledge.
- Smithers, A. (1998) Quoted in 'Do tutors topple the top girls?', *Sunday Times*, 1 February.
- Spear, M. (1997) 'Degrees of success', *Oxford Magazine*, Eighth Week, Hilary Term, pp. 6-9.
- Spear, M. (1998) 'Marks and markers', *Oxford Magazine*, Eighth Week, Hilary Term, pp. 3-5.