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5 Troubling patriarchy

In the preceding chapter, we explored the nature and dynamics of patriarchy. However, questions that necessarily arise in relation to such a topic might include the following: can one escape the gravitational pull, as it were, of the patriarchal order and economy? Can patriarchy be dismantled? To answer the last question first, we might reflect that the patriarchal order and economy suffuse and shape the culture we inhabit, together with its definition of the relationships among sex, gender, and sexuality. Thus, patriarchy directs not only what we see but also how we see it. Accordingly, it would be irrational to expect an overnight revolution that did away with both the patriarchal order and the patriarchal economy, and put something in their place that functioned properly from the very start. So it would seem that we may be stuck with patriarchy for some time to come.

However, we should recall from chapter 2 Foucault's idea that power is *productive*. That is, it would be erroneous to assume that the power of patriarchy is purely repressive (or, from the feminist perspective, oppressive): it *generates* structures, dynamics, identities, possibilities. And one of the possibilities inherent in the very fact of power, as Foucault is careful to point out, is resistance to the power of patriarchy. We should recall that, for him, power *requires* resistance for its own self-definition and efficacy *as* power. Accordingly, we might consider that already built into patriarchy is the possibility of its resistance.

However, resistance does not necessarily imply successful overthrow. Rather, for Foucault, resistance occurs at multiple points in the discursive formations that both characterize and give a particular identity and shape to a culture. In that multiplicity of sites of resistance lies the potential to bring about shifts and changes in both the patriarchal order and, as a consequence, the patriarchal economy also. However, we should not imagine that such a strategy of resistance is likely to run direct and unchallenged. Power structures and systems are adept at blocking and neutralizing resistive counterstrategies. They are also able to coopt and assimilate both the motives of resistance and those who resist, taming them in such a way as to *appear* to change while at the same time strengthening the hold upon power and people.

Take, for example, the way certain clothing fashions and tastes in music have emerged in or have been popularized by gay subculture, only to be taken up by the culture at large. "De-gayed" and so rendered "safe" for the heterosexual

majority, those clothing fashions and musical tastes then become a sign of the general social acceptance of gays and their subculture, despite an actual social blindness to the expression of antigay sentiments and even an active encouragement of homophobia. Thus, we may be confronted by the ironic paradox of someone who hates and perhaps persecutes gays, but who wears fashions pioneered by gay men, and listens to music that first became popular in gay nightclubs.

Given the capacity of dominant, powerful discourses to coopt acts that question and contest their power, and to resignify them to their own advantage, resistance in Foucauldian theory (as well as in theories of ideology), as a general strategy, *needs to be maintained*: a single moment of resistance does not constitute a victory for the resisters. It needs in addition to be supple, agile, moving from discursive site to discursive site, as conditions change. It is perhaps thus that patriarchy may be challenged and made to develop gradually a different order and economy, if it is not to be replaced entirely with some other discursive system, together with its own attendant social and conceptual organization.

The present chapter, then, is concerned with ways of understanding both patriarchy and masculinity in order to see the points at which resistance might be possible. The title of the chapter is intended, with a nod to Judith Butler's important book *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), to suggest, in the first place, a discussion of the contradictions and paradoxes implicit in the term "patriarchy," and, in the second, an exploration of three ways in which the idea and apparently incontestable power of patriarchy might be challenged and disrupted: hence, "troubled."

Abjection, misogyny, and homophobia

As the discussion in chapter 4 about homosocial desire indicated, and as Sedgwick makes clear early in her book (Sedgwick, 1985: 1–5), the issues of homosexual desire and behavior play a central part in the social and cultural construction of masculinity. Indeed, we may postulate that masculinity has traditionally depended upon and required a double definition by negation: *masculinity is not appropriate to women* (a definition by gender); and *masculinity is not to be attributed to homosexual men* (a definition by sexuality).

There are a number of implications consequent upon such a relational construction of the masculine. Significantly, it means that there is no stable definition of masculinity *in and of itself*. As we saw in chapter 2, we cannot argue that masculinity proceeds naturally from physiological maleness alone. Moreover, as we saw in chapter 3 in Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, the association of masculinity with the male body is neither natural nor inevitable. Simply, it is required discursively in order to keep the existing gender system in place. It follows, therefore, that if the masculine depends on its relation to two other terms, *any shift in the nature or meaning of these latter terms must necessarily produce a shift in the cultural definition of masculinity.*

This goes some way to explaining why the rise of feminist and gay rights movements in the 1960s precipitated both a sense of crisis and an anxiety around gender for many people. As women claimed rights such as social and legal equality, the recognition of the autonomy of female sexual desire, and the power to decide what to do with their own bodies with regard to abortion, and as homosexual men and women (and, later, other nonheteronormative subjectivities, such as transsexuals) gained greater social visibility and claimed rights of their own, many men began to feel that masculinity itself was under siege. It is to this that Sally Robinson refers, both in the title of her book, *Marked Men: white masculinity in crisis*, and in her argument. Men felt "marked," in the sense of being singled out for retribution, but also because, in sociological terms, to be "marked" is to be made visible within a discourse the power of which depends on at least one of its terms remaining unnoticed (Robinson, 2000).

Another way of conceiving the definition of the masculine by double negation is to understand that conventional masculinity sustains itself by *abjecting* both the feminine and the homosexual from within itself. "Abjection," in the sense in which it is being used here, derives from the Latin *jacere*, "to throw," together with the prefix *ab-*, "away," and refers to the rejection and/or refusal of certain objects, events, or ideas. Embedded in the notion of abjection are the informing elements, first, of disgust, nausea, or horror; and, second, of the need to expel, discard, or exile objects that prompt such strong reactions. In *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*, the French theorist Julia Kristeva suggests that subjectivity itself is, at least in part, constituted through abjection: "The abject is not an ob-ject [sic] facing me, which I name or imagine. ...The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*" (Kristeva, 1982: 1). That is, the abject is that which lies outside the sense of self, *but which helps the self to define its very subjectivity.*

However, because "what is *abject*, ... the jettisoned object, is radically excluded," it "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982: 2; original emphasis). The abject is concerned with that which is unclean and which, consequently, defiles: vomit, pus, urine, menstrual blood, semen, the facts and the odors of excrement, perspiration, decaying flesh, etc. Such bodily facts disturb our sense of a clear boundary between ourselves, as defined by our bodies, and what exists outside us; and between our understandings of what life means and what death signifies. Therefore Kristeva observes: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982: 4).

The opposition between cleanliness and defilement, between purity and impurity, is central to the notion of abjection. Kristeva points out that

> Anthropologists ... have noted that secular "filth," which has become sacred "defilement," is the *excluded* on the basis of which religious prohibition is made up. In a number of primitive societies religious rites are purification

rites whose function is to separate this or that social, sexual, or age group from one another, by means of prohibiting a filthy, defining element. It is as if dividing lines were built up between society and a certain nature, as well as within the social aggregate, on the basis of the simple logic of *excluding filth*, which, promoted to the ritual level of *defilement*, founded the "self and clean" [the two meanings of the French *propre*] of each social group if not of each subject.

<div align="right">(Kristeva, 1982: 65; original emphasis)</div>

However, Kristeva draws our attention to the fact that "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (Kristeva, 1982: 69; original emphasis). That is, an object, person or event becomes defiling only when a boundary has been transgressed, and a margin that defines the polluted from the pure, the improper from the proper, is established at the edge of that boundary. Yet, at the same time, that which is polluting blurs the boundary between the proper (in both senses as "appropriate to" or "characteristic of," and "clean and pure") and the improper. It suggests that the boundary is permeable, maybe even only temporary.

Abjection thus sets up the possibility that the boundaries that establish the meanings of "filthy" and "clean" are, at the same time, undermined and rendered ineffectual. It is for this reason that Kristeva observes, "what is *abject*, ... the jettisoned object, ... draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982: 2; original emphasis):

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. Today, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere* [Latin for "to fall"], cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled.

<div align="right">(Kristeva, 1982: 3–4; original emphasis)</div>

"Meaning," in Kristeva's terms, thus includes not merely semantic understanding. It embraces also such key social and cultural elements as structure and hierarchy, rank and precedence, investments of power, permissible and impermissible relationships. If we take, for example, the question of incest, we can see that the taboo sexual relationship between a parent and child, or between a pair of siblings

(setting aside such issues as genetic inbreeding) confuses structure and hierarchy, and therefore also rank and precedence, and the power that accrues to these. How, for instance, is a woman to respond socially to a sexual partner who is also her biological father? The former role might imply equality, whereas the latter role might require subordination on the part of the woman. Moreover, what of any child born of such a pairing? Would she or he be considered a child or grandchild of the father? How would this affect such issues as the transfer of title or property, or the logic of inheritance as set out in the father's last will and testament? It becomes clear, when we ask such questions, that incest is abjected and inspires disgust as a practice at least partly because it dangerously collapses many of the structures and required behaviors (the meanings) by which society functions. As a result, such practices and those who engage in them become defined as both defiled and defiling.

If we return now to the issue of masculinity, bearing in mind Judith Butler's idea of the performativity of gender, we can begin to understand how misogyny (the rejection of women) and homophobia (the [irrational] fear of homosexuality and of homosexuals) in effect constitute the boundaries of masculinity itself, and so help to construct the masculine. That is, in order for the masculine to define itself as proper to only the heterosexual male and his body, any possibility or trace of the feminine or the homosexual must be abjected, expelled to produce *other* subjects, and *other* kinds of body. Indeed, *the masculine is constituted by the simultaneous abjection of the feminine and the male-homosexual,*[1] and the accompanying crystallization of both misogyny and homophobia as ways to manage these abjected constituents. Beyond this, *the patriarchal order itself can be seen to depend on the process of abjection*, together with the strategies of management of that which has been abjected. Put otherwise, *both* masculinity *and* the patriarchal order require, and come into existence simultaneously with, the abjection of the feminine and the male-homosexual.

Activity 5.1

- Reflect on instances of abjection in your own experience.
- Did these have to do with bodily functions only? (For example, you might consider the way in which the homeless may represent a particular form of abjection.)

    - What elements or facts are being abjected?
    - How do these help to constitute the socially or culturally "proper" through the process of abjection?

- You might, in addition, consider other possible forms of abjection: for example, racial or ethnic difference, physical disability, aging, etc.
- How is the fact of death treated, both in reality and in cultural representations in movies, TV or literature?

Indeed, the homosexual male represents for masculinity perhaps the extreme condition of abjection. In form he resembles the "clean" or undefiled hetero-sexual ("proper") man, yet in sexual practice he is generally represented as femi-nine or feminized, because it is culturally assumed that he permits his body, like the female body, to be penetrated by another male. In this way, the gay male can be constructed as *both* a failed man *and* a failed woman. Small wonder, therefore, that the very idea of male homosexuality can often arouse feelings of repugnance, outrage, and horror amongst heterosexuals, especially men; or that those feelings in turn can produce reactions of rejection of and/or violence toward gay men. These can then be justified by recourse to various rationalizations, such as the argument from nature: the idea that homosexual behavior is "unnatural," although we saw in chapter 2 that this assumption is open to question. Another "rationali-zation" is to be found in biblical proscriptions, although such appeals to the Bible are usually highly selective. For example, the injunction in Deuteronomy 22:11 against wearing clothing made of a blend of linen and wool is rarely invoked.[2] We may conclude that these arguments are retrospective projections to explain and justify to the culture the maintenance of both the patriarchal order and the masculine through the abjection of the male-homosexual.

The case of the feminine is not much better. Women's bodies are perceived as "leaky," or at any rate as leakier than men's, because they menstruate and lactate, functions that blur the boundaries between the interior and exterior of the body. Moreover, those bodies are understood as more or less permanently open to the exterior world, because they permit the ingress of the male body in the form of the penis in sexual intercourse, and the egress of the infant's body in childbirth. Accordingly, therefore, like the male homosexual's body, woman's body comes to be thought of as impure, unclean, defiled, and defiling. However, unlike the body of the male homosexual, the female body is necessary to procreation, and must therefore be preserved as the appropriate object of erotic desire. The inferi-orization through abjection of the feminine accordingly draws on a rationale that resembles that applied to the male-homosexual, but inflects it differently.

For example, the argument from nature postulates, on the basis of observation of (some) animal behaviors, that women constitute "the weaker sex," and must be protected and managed. The appeal to the Bible as the authority on gender in politics both appears to support this argument from nature, and strengthens it by means of religious authority. It begins with the story of the Fall, in the Garden of Eden. Eve, we may recall, was created, not directly from raw material, as Adam was, but rather from already "processed" material, namely, Adam's rib (Genesis 2:21–3), making her a sort of second-hand, recycled goods. She not only succumbed to the temptations of the serpent, and ate of the divinely forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but successfully tempted Adam to do the same (Genesis 3:1–6). Woman's moral weakness and intellectual infe-riority, together with the menace that she represents as a sexual temptress, are thus inscribed early in the foundational text of Judeo-Christian culture. Reinforced both by similar representations of women in the Bible (for example, the seduc-tress Delilah, in Judges 16) and, over the centuries, by secular depictions of

woman, Eve has provided a long-standing model for a misogynistic attitude towards women in general. Again, we may detect here a retrospective justifica-tion for the abjection of women and of the female body, as a way of constructing the masculine.

Even science can be marshaled in support of this cause. For example, *Idols of Perversity: fantasies of feminine evil in fin-de-siècle culture* is a study of negative representations of women and of the female body in the late nineteenth century, particularly after the emergence of the theories of evolution and development of anthropology as a legitimate discipline. In it, Bram Dijkstra observes: "But when we consider what 'improvements' evolutionists such as [Charles] Darwin and [Carl] Vogt made in our conceptions of the role of woman in society, we discover that where woman was concerned the theory of evolution represented a baroquely inscribed license to denigrate and destroy" (Dijkstra, 1986: 163). Evolution theory was deployed as a way of theorizing racial differences, and of inferiorizing peoples who were not Caucasian. Vogt, for example, thought that the "Negro" was considerably more "simious" (apelike) than Caucasian peoples (Dijkstra notes that Vogt's "standard of measurement" was the "German male"), and that in non-Caucasian peoples, whom he thought closer to the animal than Caucasian ones, the female tended to be the more animal-like. "From this conclusion," comments Dijkstra, "it was but a short step to the decision that everything in the revolutionary process pointed to the fact that the development of woman in general tended to parallel that of the 'inferior' races rather than the evolving white male" (Dijkstra, 1986: 167).

In a more benign inflection of this kind of theory, which saw the evolutionarily undeveloped races, and, in the white one, woman, less as animals than as under-developed children,

> it became a foregone conclusion that a link was to be discovered between woman's 'stunted' evolution and her reproductive responsibility. ... [W]oman was mentally a child because she needed all her "vital energy" to have children. Brain work required much vital energy – and hence brain work was properly the realm of the male. To think was to "spend" vital energy just as much as it took to give birth to a child. Hence men created in the intellectual realm, while women needed to conserve energy to create in the physical realm.
>
> (Dijkstra, 1986: 169)

The notion emerged that woman was, according to the terms of evolution theory, at least potentially, if not actually, "degenerate." This was a term commonly used in the nineteenth century to describe people and behaviors that indicated either a failure to evolve or a sliding back down the evolutionary ladder. It was used also of effeminate or homosexual males, as Christopher E. Forth notes:

> Degeneration could effectively transform men into "women" or "savages," and women would become more mannish and dominant than their weakened

male counterparts. It threatened Western society with a reversal of hierar-
chies of race, gender and class.

(Forth, 2008: 145)

By constructing woman as under-evolved, by comparison with man, such theories
succeeded in abjecting women and the female body more emphatically and
apparently without possible contradiction, because it was done in the name
of science. However, it becomes clear that this was part of a long tradition of
distancing the feminine, together with the male-homosexual, in order to *produce*
the masculine.

However, ironically (and paradoxically), in order for that which is disgusting,
nauseating, or otherwise unacceptable to be abjected, *it first has to be imagined
as integral to that entity or agency that does the abjecting.* So, for the masculine
to regard itself as clean and purified by the expulsion of the abject to somewhere
"out there," outside and beyond the masculine and the male body, it first has to
perceive itself as containing the abject "in here," inside and part of the masculine
and the male body. The fear that what has been expelled "out there" may return
"in here" renders unstable not only the masculine, but also the patriarchal order
itself, together with the gender system by which these sustain themselves.

Activity 5.2

- Think about movies or TV shows you have viewed recently (for
  example, those featuring superheroes), and reflect on the ways
  that secondary characters of a particular movie or show might be
  understood as made up of elements abjected from the hero or heroes.

  - What cues or clues are given in the movie or show to suggest
    this?
  - Are there any elements of gender and, specifically, of masculinity,
    that you perceive as having been abjected from the body or
    character of the hero to those of the secondary character?
  - In a number of movies, including those centered on a superhero,
    macho, aggressive masculinity may be abjected, and displaced
    to become a component of the villain character or other second-
    ary characters. What does this suggest about current ideas of
    the masculine, and of what must be abjected in order that it be
    reconstituted and characterized in a particular way?

Ex-nomination

At this point, we would be entitled to ask how, if both masculinity and the patri-
archal order are so frail and so tenuously maintained, they have come to dominate

the gender system and, with it, the social order itself. One answer to this question
is offered by an analysis of social history, which in turn suggests that historically
the patriarchal order has been subject to change, and has adapted to new social
conditions. For example, in *The Secret History of Domesticity*, Michael McKeon
proposes that

> Patriarchalism [a political theory advanced by the seventeenth-century
> English Royalist Sir Robert Filmer] entailed an analogy between the state
> and the family that legitimated each institution by associating it with the
> "naturalness" of the other. As a theory of political obligation, patriarchalism
> enjoined upon subjects a subordination to the magistrate [who represented
> royal authority] analogous to that of family members to the male head of
> the household.

(McKeon, 2005: 11)

McKeon adds that this "patriarchalist analogy is not simply a metaphor linking
two separate entities; it defines the continuity between, the interpenetration of,
things that are distinct but inseparable from each other." In other words, the
monarch is to the state as the father is to the family and household. And, just as
the state's people are subject to the monarch's authority and owe the king
(or queen) allegiance and obedience, so members of the family and household are
subject to the father's authority and likewise owe him allegiance and obedience.
McKeon notes that, "In a dynastic monarchy, moreover, the analogy between the
state and the family is reinforced by their metonymic relationship: political sover-
eignty is a function of familial inheritance" (McKeon, 2005: 11). That is, the
fact of dynastic monarchy (a new king's inheritance of rule from his father)
strengthened the imagined correlation between royal authority in the state and
paternal authority in the family.

However, argues McKeon, articulating such theory explicitly, as in Sir Robert
Filmer's work, exposes it to criticism. He cites the poet John Milton: "[B]y
calling kings fathers of their country, you think this metaphor has forced me to
apply right off to kings whatever I might admit to fathers. Fathers and kings are
very different things ..." (McKeon, 2005: 11). McKeon comments, "The very
substance of patriarchalism ... was countermanded by the manner of its articula-
tion" (McKeon, 2005: 13); that is, in articulating the social theory of patriar-
chalism, Filmer and others rendered it vulnerable to criticism. The ensuing
separation of royal authority over the state from paternal authority over the family
and household thus marks a new phase in the history of the patriarchal order, one
that establishes the order both as natural and as authoritative.

The patriarchal order and economy, then, do not always take the same shape,
employ the same strategies, or (besides ensuring the ascendancy of men over
women) serve the same functions. By adapting to changing historical and social
conditions, patriarchy seeks to guarantee its own survival. This is very different
from the dominance of males in nature, a "fact" often cited in support of male

dominance in human society. This is by no means a consistent law in nature: consider, for instance, the dominance of the female of the species among bees or ants. Moreover, dogs or lions or eagles do not have to adjust to changing *social* conditions, although they may well have to adapt to changing environmental ones. The adaptive longevity of patriarchy lends it the illusion of an immutable fact of human nature, if not also of the animal world.

Another and rather different answer to the question of how the patriarchal order has sustained its authority is suggested indirectly by the French semiotician Roland Barthes in his collection of essays titled *Mythologies*. In a passage in "Myth today," he discusses a particular phenomenon in French history and society. Since the French Revolution in 1789, political and social power has been exercized by a middle class, or bourgeoisie, of varying kinds, but for whom "the same status – a certain regime of ownership, a certain order, a certain ideology – remains at a deeper level" (Barthes, 2009: 163). However, although the notion of a bourgeoisie "as an economic fact ... is *named* without any difficulty: capitalism is openly professed[,] ... [a]s a political fact, the bourgeoisie has some difficulty in acknowledging itself: there are no 'bourgeois' parties in the Chamber" (Barthes, 2009: 163–64). Barthes goes on to note that, "As an ideological fact, it [the bourgeoisie] completely disappears: the bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man" (Barthes, 2009: 164).

He concludes that this social class "makes its status undergo a real *ex-nominating* operation: the bourgeoisie is defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*" (Barthes, 2009: 164; original emphasis). The question remains: how is this ex-nomination of the bourgeoisie brought about? Barthes proposes that, "Politically, the haemorrhage of the name 'bourgeois' is effected through the idea of *nation*. This was once a progressive idea, which has served to get rid of the aristocracy; today, the bourgeoisie merges into the nation, even if it has, in order to do so, to exclude from it the elements which it decides are allogenous [different in kind] ..." (Barthes, 2009: 164; original emphasis). That is, by identifying itself with "the nation," with which of course every citizen identifies her- or himself, an entire class (the bourgeoisie) disappears. It is not simply that it identifies itself *with* "the nation," but rather that it identifies itself *as* "the nation."

It follows, therefore, that the citizens of the *state* who like to think of themselves as members of a *nation* are induced to characterize that membership as essentially bourgeois in nature. When "everyone," despite actual individual social class, race, ethnicity, or profession, starts to think of her- or himself as effectively bourgeois because a member of a "bourgeois nation" (*is transformed*, as it were, *into* bourgeois), the bourgeoisie itself becomes so normalized that it disappears. We no longer notice it, any more than we notice the air we breathe. This is why Barthes observes that "Bourgeois ideology can therefore spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk: no one here will throw this name of bourgeois back at it" (Barthes, 2009: 165).

Activity 5.3

- Consider how, in your own experience, the appeal to "nation" and patriotism might ex-nominate any class, race, cultural, or economic differences between the dominant group and subordinate ones.

  - For example, how does the familiar and resounding phrase, "My fellow Americans" erase material difference in order to create what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006)?

We may draw a productive parallel between Barthes's analysis of the fashion by which a particular social class has come to dominate the entire social structure and the way that the patriarchal order has succeeded in establishing the masculine as the gender norm, and hence as able to dominate the gender system and, through this, the social order itself. For as long as patriarchy remained tacit as a key principle of experiencing gender difference and hence a dominant discourse in the organization of society, it was difficult to contest its power. For example, in the nineteenth century individual women who defied its regulation of their lives could be censured. They could even be confined to prison or a mental institution, whether because they protested against the socially accepted treatment of women, for instance, or by asserting the autonomous nature of female sexuality and sexual desire, thereby flying in the face of pronouncements of men like William Acton (1813–75), a doctor and surgeon of whom Steven Marcus remarks, "Though his name has long since been forgotten, Acton was something of a figure in his own time" (Marcus, 1969: 2):

I should say that the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally. It is too true, I admit, as the divorce courts show, that there are some few women who have sexual desire so strong that they surpass those of men. ... I admit, of course, the existence of sexual excitement terminating even in nymphomania, a form of insanity which those accustomed to visit lunatic asylums must be fully conversant with; but, with these sad exceptions, there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance ... and even if roused (which in many instances it never can be) is very moderate compared with that of the male. ... The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.

As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for

the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions. No nervous or feeble young man need, therefore, be deterred from marriage by any exaggerated notion of the duties required from him. The married woman has no wish to be treated on the footing of a mistress.

(cited in Marcus, 1969: 31–32)

Of interest in this passage is the assertion of a difference between men and women that is grounded not only in sex but also in sexuality. "Proper" women (that is, women who are sober and clean, and behave appropriately, according to the social and marital roles laid out for them; in other words, marriageable women) are distinguished on the basis of sex drive from nymphomaniacs (rightly confined to "lunatic asylums") and mistresses, whom Acton clearly considers to be only one step up from the common prostitute. Such a "proper" woman is thus unlikely to make inordinate sexual demands on her husband, however "nervous or feeble" he might be.

It is important to note, moreover, that for Acton female sexuality is closely linked to male desire, and to "the desire of maternity." In other words, sexual desire on the part of a woman cannot be autonomous, but depends rather on pleasing her husband and fulfilling his desire, and/or her wish to conceive and bear children. To admit an independent *female* sexuality and sexual desire would challenge male authority over woman, her body, and her desire. It would also undermine the definition of the masculine through the abjection of the feminine, including female sexuality, which could then no longer be classified as in some way repellent, to be dominated and controlled rather than allowed its free play.

The point to grasp here is that *women came to see themselves in the same terms*. "Nice" women were those who accepted their roles as subordinates to men, whether as wives, secretaries, "salesgirls," social acquaintances, and the like, and as relatively asexual maternal figures, whether as actual mothers or surrogates like teachers or nurses. "Nasty" women were those who did not know or accept their "place." These were insubordinate women who defied male authority, asserted their own sexuality, or who refused to acknowledge their dependence on men not only in economic and social terms but also in terms of the construction of their own subjectivity.

There were, and still are, both social and personal consequences attendant upon the masculine perception of a woman as "nice" or "nasty." Thus, when Sandra Harding proclaims, "Women have always resisted male domination" (Harding, 1988: 5), we must understand this to mean "individual women," rather than "women as a class." Indeed, Harding later remarks that "there have always been women willing and able to produce sexist and misogynistic thought" (Harding, 1988: 11). From this we may gather, first, that not *all* women have resisted male domination. Second, for many women complicity with and obedience to the patriarchal imperative that subordinates women and affirms their inferiority to men are not necessarily experienced as treachery to their own sex. Quite the contrary: such women are often likely to see their rebellious, refractory

sisters as traitors to their femininity and ordained roles. And, of course, there are also women who may well resist or, at any rate, resent male domination, but are so situated that compliance becomes simply a survival strategy.

Historically, one can find many earlier illustrations of the ways that the patriarchal order has exerted often silent, yet irresistible pressures that in turn have determined the flows of power. Even how the two sexes have been theorized can indicate the presence of those patriarchal pressures. For example, as Thomas Laqueur observes in *Making Sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*, from the ancient world through to Europe in the early nineteenth century, the assumption was that "at least two genders correspond to but one sex" (Laqueur, 1990: 25). He quotes as an epigraph to his second chapter the following statement by Galen of Pergamum (c. 130–200 CE): "Turn outward the woman's, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's [genital organs], and you will find the same in both in every respect" (Laqueur, 1990: 25). Laqueur remarks, "Instead of being divided by their reproductive anatomies, the sexes are linked by a common one. Women, in other words, are inverted, and hence less perfect, men. They have exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong places" (Laqueur, 1990: 26).

The assumption clearly was that men and male anatomy constituted the norm, while women and female anatomy represented an inferior variation of it. Of course, as Laqueur notes parenthetically, "The arrow of perfection *could* go either or both ways," and he quotes a remark made by the character Mlle de l'Espinasse in Denis Diderot's *D'Alembert's Dream*, a series of philosophical dialogues written in 1769 and published in 1830: "Perhaps men are nothing but a freakish variety of women, or women only a freakish variety of men" (Laqueur, 1990: 26; original emphasis). However, historically, "the arrow of perfection" pointed chiefly to the masculine and the male anatomy.

The normalization of the masculine and man's body can be seen everywhere. From Leonardo da Vinci's famous *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1485), in which a man's body is placed simultaneously within a circle and a square, as an exercise in ideal proportion, to the traditional, although now largely discontinued, use of the masculine as a generic noun (or pronoun) (for example, "the history of Man on earth"), the feminine is understood as included, but backgrounded, silenced, rendered invisible, and hence, in effect, absent. "Man" thus becomes the universal category. "Woman" functions either as a minor subcategory, or vanishes altogether. The feminine pronouns "she" and "her" have in the past often been used to signify certain inanimate objects or abstract collectives. Thus, a ship or an automobile could be referred to as "she"; for instance, "She left port last Sunday" or "Now that she's been repaired, her engine is running smoothly." So, indeed, could an entire nation state; with reference, for example, to France, Britain, or America, one could speak of the country as "she" and of the people as "her citizens." Such phraseology implied that there existed a continuity or parallel between woman and objects, especially mechanical ones, or abstract ideas, with further implications about the ways each might be thought of and treated.

Activity 5.4

- Can you find examples, from your own experience in talking to others, reading or watching TV or movies, of the ex-nomination of "man" so that this term becomes a catch-all term that erases sex/gender difference, or even differences of class or race/ethnicity?

  o Where such differences may be highlighted, what is the effect of that highlighting? (For example, this might be the isolation and inferiorization of a group or individual, or their marginalization.)
  o What might be its purpose (for instance, to foreground the implicit positive virtues of the ex-nominated group, etc.)?

Moreover, the "female ailments" or "women's disorders" mentioned in everyday conversations, often with a sense that these somehow constituted a topic tabooed for men and better spoken of (secretively) amongst women, have separated the female body discursively from the male one. This latter has been assumed implicitly to be healthy; it is only comparatively recently that we have begun to hear about "men's health issues." Even pregnancy could be viewed as a female malady that was "cured" by childbirth, with the implication that not only were men lucky to escape this particular affliction, but the fact that they have done so is a further indication of their physiological superiority. Small wonder, then, that one of the early campaigns of feminism in the 1960s (and it continues) was to secure both the grammatical and semantic inclusion of women in the language of institutions, the media, and daily speech.

Thus, although women, as a subordinate group, may have chafed against male dominance and so also against the authority of the patriarchal order, many individual women historically have naturalized their position as subordinate and inferior to men simply as women's lot in life or women's role. By contrast, men, particularly those whose subjectivity conforms to and so matches the socially dominant and hence privileged group (for instance, in our own culture, the white, heterosexual, middle-class male), generally have not questioned their apparently natural role as dominant and superior. Nor, of course, have they interrogated the patriarchal system that enabled such dominance and superiority. To use Barthes's term, the patriarchal order was ex-nominated, and so rendered natural and universal; at least, that is, until the 1960s and the years following, when the word "patriarchy" entered common usage, thanks to the work of the women's movements and feminist critique of the social order and its dynamics. Renomination, then, provides a strategy by which to render patriarchy visible and, like Filmer's patriarchalist theory, vulnerable not only to criticism, but also to change. In Sally Robinson's terms, it is not only the dominant form of masculinity that becomes marked, that is, both visible and accountable, but so too does patriarchy itself (Robinson, 2000).

Queer theory and social critique

A further radical challenge to the supremacy and power of patriarchy emerged in the 1990s in the form of queer theory. Proponents of "queer" as a descriptor and of queer theory were uncomfortable with the minority and identity politics that characterized Gay Liberation in the 1960s. They therefore sought to rethink the notion of sexual "otherness" and difference so that nonheteronormative people (lesbians, gays, the transgendered, transsexuals, and so on) could be included as part of the wider community, rather than being corralled (by the general public as well as by doctors, psychologists, politicians and others) as "abnormal."

Such a definition constructed in the heteronormative as inherently "other" to that general public, and as seeking assimilation into the larger community through tolerance, whether by educating the public or demanding equality via the principle of civil rights or the repeal of laws that criminalized homosexuality. The descriptor "queer" is thus a reclaiming and refunctioning of a term used earlier as a term of abuse and humiliation, much as "nigger" has been reclaimed and refunctioned by African Americans as a positive and powerful descriptor intended to challenge a history of slavery, insult, and marginalization. However, whereas "nigger" remains a sensitive term that non-African Americans tend to avoid, "queer" is consciously deployed to embrace more than only "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual."

Michael Warner remarks of the minority politics adopted by activists and theorists that "'sexual orientation' has often been used as though it were parallel to 'race' or 'sex,'" observing that the attempt to use this to define nonheteronormative subjects as belonging to a "'nation,' 'community,' even 'ethnicity'" has produced results that "have been partly unhappy, for the same reasons" (Warner, 1993: xxv). He continues:

> Among these alternatives the dominant concept has been that of a "gay and lesbian community," a notion generated in the tactics of Anglo-American identity politics and its liberal-national environment, where the buried model is racial and ethnic politics. Although it has had importance in organizational efforts (where in circular fashion it receives concretization), the notion of a community has remained problematic if only because nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space, because much of lesbian and gay history has to do with noncommunity, and because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding ("We Are Everywhere"). Community also falsely suggests an ideological and nostalgic contrast with the atomization of modern capitalist society. And in the liberal-pluralist frame it predisposes that political demands will be treated as demands for the toleration and representation of the minority constituency.

(Warner, 1993: xxv–xxvi)

Warner suggests that the notion of a gay and lesbian community is an artificial construct. It is not an "organic" community that preexists the individual gay or

lesbian in the same way that an ethnic or racial community does for its members. Moreover, what members of this artificial community have in common is their sexual orientation, and perhaps similar experiences in recognizing and coming to terms with that orientation, as well as having to confront the issue of homophobia, and whether or not to "come out of the closet." Although these are of course powerful factors in creating a sense of common experience, other common experiences, such as belonging to an ethnic or racial group, sharing a socioeconomic background, and inheriting a long and significant history *as* a community, are much more varied and diffuse.

Steven Seidman points out, indeed, that

> Modern Western homophobic and gay-affirmative theory has assumed a homosexual subject. Dispute revolved around its origin (natural or social), changing social forms and roles, its moral meaning, and political strategies of repression and resistance. There has been little serious disagreement regarding the assumption that homosexual theory and politics has as its object "the homosexual" as a stable, unified, and identifiable human type.
>
> (Seidman, 1996: 11)

The notion of "queer," argues Seidman, critiques that notion of the homosexual as "a stable, unified, and identifiable human type":

> Drawing from the critique of unitary identity politics by people of color and sex rebels, and from the poststructural critique of "representational" models of language, Queer theorists argue that identities are always multiple or at best composites with literally an infinite number of ways in which "identity-components" (e.g., sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age, able-ness) can intersect or combine. Any specific identity construction, moreover, is arbitrary, unstable, and exclusionary. Identity constructions necessarily entail the silencing or exclusion of some experiences or forms of life. For example, asserting a black, middle-class, American lesbian identity silences differences that relate to religion, regional location, subcultural identification, relation to feminism, age, or education. Identity constructs are necessarily stable since they elicit opposition or resistance by people whose experiences or interests are submerged by a particular assertion of identity. Finally, rather than viewing the affirmation of identity as necessarily liberating, Queer theorists view them as, in part, disciplinary and regulatory structures. Identity constructions function as templates defining selves and behaviors and therefore excluding a range of possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations.
>
> (Seidman, 1996: 11–12)

Queer theory thus problematizes the notion of identity as integral, stable, and self-sufficient, seeing it rather as the product of a range of exclusions and

suppressions, and itself permitting only a selective and therefore limited range of behaviors, attitudes, and practices. Implicitly, therefore, "identity" is always-already at least partially complicit with dominant discourses. In arguing instead for subjectivity that allows free play to the many and various constituent elements that make up "the (nonheteronormative) person," queer theory aligns itself with other poststructuralist and postmodern theories that also seek to undo and interrogate the "taken-for-granted" assumptions that underlie our culture and our social structure and dynamics.

The notion of a gay and lesbian community (as Warner suggests) creates a nostalgic sense of belonging, especially in the context of an "atomized" society. However, it does not address the larger issue of the continuing separateness of such a community from the greater society, on whose grace and favor that community nevertheless depends. Its localization, especially in larger cities, is often physical, in the form of a gay and lesbian "ghetto," which in turn makes it vulnerable to actual attack by homophobic members of the larger society. Furthermore, whereas the notion of a gay and lesbian community may have been imagined at the outset as global, reaching out to nonheteronormative people everywhere, in practice its politics may tend towards the insular, its political and social concerns influenced by its immediate social, historical, and cultural context.

The emphasis in queer politics and theory on, in Warner's terms, "dispersal rather than localization" therefore seeks to broaden and redefine the scope of what constitutes "normal":

> The preference for "queer" [as opposed to "gay"] represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. ..."[Q]ueer" gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual. ... The universalizing utopianism of queer theory does not entirely replace small minority-based versions of lesbian and gay theory – nor could it, since normal sexuality and the machinery of enforcing it do not bear down equally on everyone, as we are constantly reminded by pervasive forms of terror [aimed at homosexuals both as individuals and as a group], coercion, violence, and devastation. The insistence on "queer" – a term initially generated in the context of terror – has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence.
>
> (Warner, 1993: xxvi)

Violence, then, is generated, not merely through the intolerance of individuals or groups, but rather through a discourse of normalization which defines the nonheteronormative as abnormal (in turn permitting the latter to be classified in categories ranging from "sick" through "sickening" to "menacing") and so, in effect, licenses intolerance and any consequent acts of violence. The task of

"queer" as descriptor and as theory is, therefore, to interrogate both the grounds and bounds of "the normal." "'Queer,'" observes Warner, "is also a way of cutting against mandatory gender divisions, though gender continues to be a dividing line":

> Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on that broad social terrain with more specific resistance on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure, on the other. "Queer" therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics.
>
> (Warner, 1993: xxvi)

That population ought not be conceived as restricted only to the nonheteronorma-tive. Rather, the project of "queer" has been to expand and thereby make more spacious ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality. It posits, for example, that sexual orientation is more fluid than the conventional notion that there are heterosexuals and there are homosexuals, with bisexuals occupying an uneasy space between these two categories.

Indeed, this had already been suggested in Alfred C. Kinsey's important 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. The so-called "Kinsey Scale," developed in conjunction with Wardell Pomeroy and Clyde Martin, locates male sexuality across seven categories, ranging from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual). The Kinsey team discovered that, although most men reported that they were exclusively heterosexual, and a small number that they were exclusively homosexual, "many individuals disclosed behaviors or thoughts somewhere in between." Kinsey observed that "Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats ... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects" ("Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosocial Rating Scale," 1996–2011).

In *The Male Body: a new look at men in public and in private*, Susan Bordo points out that

> A person's genetic inheritance may be a fact of nature. But that inheritance will set him up for a struggle with the social and sexual identities assigned to him only if those categories are too rigid to accommodate his experience. Some cultures have greater diversity among gender categories than we do. ...
>
> ... If the available categories of social identity are flexible, fewer people will feel themselves – whatever their biological dispositions – in conflict with them. Part of what seems to be going on nowadays is that some people are trying to reconstruct the categories as well as their bodies. More profoundly, as people alter, expand, and experiment with – surgically and otherwise – the bodily forms that constitute our repertoire of sexual possibilities (or, for that

matter, racial possibilities), the categories *inevitably* will become inadequate. Spend some time loitering around the halls of the middle-class high school, watching young people walk by. It's no longer as easy as it once was to figure out who is "gay" and who is "straight," who is "black" and who is "white." I put these categories in quotes to emphasize how socially mutable they are and the fact that people's realities were *never* as simple as we imagine them to be from certain bodily signs. Nowadays, the codes are getting even less reliable than they once were, as young people "mix it up" – genetically, sexually, stylistically. ...

> This mixing-it-up is what contemporary theorists are talking about when they use the term "queer" to cover a whole range of sexual styles replacing the old dualistic categories of sexual orientation and gender "identity" which forced us to declare ourselves gay or straight, masculine or feminine, male or female.
>
> (Bordo, 1999: 40–2; original emphasis)

"Queer," therefore, both acknowledges and insists that sexuality is not a case of either/or, but rather a spectrum along which different kinds of sexuality are distributed. Moreover, the term also suggests fluidity or mobility, such that the individual subject may find her- or himself occupying different positions along the spectrum at different times, under different circumstances.

So, for example, a man who in his sexual practice is entirely heterosexual may nonetheless find himself thinking in nonheterosexual ways: discovering something erotic in a representation of a nude male body, for instance, or developing a "crush" on another male, whether because of the latter's beauty of face or physique, or his role or performance as an athlete or a movie star. Such an individual's entertaining (however indistinctly or fleetingly) of the notion of an erotic involvement with another man although not necessarily acting upon it does not make him gay, or even a closeted gay. But it may well define him as queer. Likewise, a homosexual subject who may consider (again, however indistinctly or fleetingly) the erotic possibilities of the female form or of an actual woman, may also think of himself as queer. In other words, it is possible to be straight and queer, *and* gay and queer. Thus, Seidman remarks:

> Queer theory has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. I take as central to Queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. I interpret Queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos [goal or target] of Western homosexual politics.
>
> (Seidman, 1996: 10)

Activity 5.5

- How do you define yourself, in terms of sex, gender, race, class, sexuality?

  ○ Are there any aspects of that self that seem to you the most important ones, and why? How would foregrounding other aspects change your perception of your own identity, or other people's perception of you?
  ○ What aspects might be excluded (for instance, regional origin, subcultural identification, political affiliation, religious affinity, position in family, and so on) and which might produce a different understanding of your identity?
  ○ What might be the reasons for your self-definition, in the light of such different understandings?

Queer reading

Indeed, it is perhaps therefore more useful to think of "queer" as functioning as a verb rather than a noun or an adjective. That is, while one may *be* (a) straight or (a) gay, one *does* queer, or one queers, by interrogating assumptions about sexual identity, challenging the requirements of patriarchy regarding sex, gender, or sexuality. One can also read the culture and its artifacts (social behaviors, literary texts, movies and TV, and so on) against the grain by questioning the meaning preferred by dominant discourse, and/or juxtaposing to it another response or understanding that does not cancel the preferred meaning but rather runs parallel to it while at the same time contesting it. To read the culture queerly is thus to "que(e)ry" it, not by substituting such a reading for a more conventional one, but rather by supplementing the latter with the former. Put more simply, a queer reading is not *instead of* but rather *as well as* the conventional one.

Alexander Doty explains how he deploys the term "queer" in his *Making Things Perfectly Queer: interpreting mass culture*:

"Queer" texts/textual elements, then, are those discussed with reference to a range or a network of non-straight ideas. The queerness in these cases might combine the lesbian, the gay, and the bisexual, or it might be a textual queerness not accurately described even by a combination of these labels ... "[Q]ueer" is used to describe the non-straight work, positions, pleasures, and readings of people who either don't share the same "sexual orientation" as that articulated in the texts they are producing or responding to (the gay man who takes queer pleasure in a lesbian sitcom narrative, for example), or who don't define themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual (or straight, for that matter). Finally, "queer" is occasionally used as an umbrella term, à la "homosexual,"

when I want to make a collective point about lesbians, and/or gays, and/or bisexuals, and/or queers (whether self-identified queers or queer-positioned non-queers).

(Doty, 1993: xviii)

He elaborates further the inclusiveness of the term "queer," saying that he needed

a term with some ambiguity, a term that would describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transsexual, and straight queerness. While we acknowledge that homosexuals as well as heterosexuals can operate or mediate from within straight cultural spaces and positions – after all, most of us grew up learning the rules of straight culture – we have paid less attention to the proposition that basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments. And these people should be encouraged to examine and express these moments *as* queer, not as moments of "homosexual panic," or temporary confusion, or as unfortunate, shameful, or sinful lapses in judgment or taste to be ignored, repressed, condemned, or somehow explained away within and by straight cultural politics – or even within and by gay or lesbian discourses.

(Doty, 1993: 2–3)

He goes on to read queerly a number of movies and TV programs, among these the series *Laverne and Shirley*, which ran from 1976 to 1983. Set in Milwaukee in the late 1950s, this show centered on two young women in search of love and marriage. Doty argues that this series offers, despite its avowedly heterosexual narrative, another, more shadowy story about the relationship between these two women. For him, *Laverne and Shirley* represents only one of a group of TV shows in which there is a "crucial investment in constructing narratives that connect an audience's pleasure to the activities and relationships of women – which results in situating most male characters as potential threats to the spectator's narrative pleasure":

It is this kind of narrative construction I am calling "lesbian." The spectator positions and pleasures audiences take in relation to these lesbian sitcoms I called either "lesbian" (for self-identified lesbians) or "queer" (for anybody else).

(Doty, 1993: 41)

That is, because a lesbian viewer is likely to see (or to want to see) the relationship between two women in such a show as at least potentially lesbian, her reading is not queer. However, for any other viewer, including a gay man, such a reading *is* queer, and queers the series. Importantly, a straight-identified

viewer who might occasionally perceive the surfacing of such a reading in her or his consumption of the series experiences, in Doty's terms, a "queer moment."

Even so, it might be argued that a self-identified lesbian viewer who understands a program like *Laverne and Shirley* as offering, however covertly, an alternative lesbian narrative or subtext nonetheless queers the primary narrative and representation of social and sexual relations. As Doty himself observes, "after all, most of us grew up learning the rules of straight culture," and these include the ways in which texts are to be decoded and understood, especially from the perspective of the dominant. A lesbian reading of *Laverne and Shirley*, therefore, demonstrates the ultimate inability of the dominant to control meaning in absolute terms, and thereby also to control people's behaviors and inclinations. In this respect, such a reading must surely count as queer and as queering the text.

Queer reading draws on the approach of deconstruction (also called "poststructuralism"), strongly identified with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida:

> In a series of astute readings of major philosophical and literary texts, Derrida showed that, by taking the unspoken or unformulated propositions of a text literally, by showing the gaps and *supplements*, the subtle internal self-contradictions, the text can be shown to be saying something quite other than what it appears to be saying. In fact, in a certain sense, the text can be shown not to be "saying something" at all but many different things, some of which subtly subvert the conscious intentions of the writer. By throwing into relief the self-betrayal of the text, the effects of the supplement and of *différance*, of *trace* and of *dissemination*, Derrida shows that the text is telling its own story, quite a different story from what the writer imagines he is creating. A new text thus gradually begins to emerge, but this text too is subtly at variance with itself, and the deconstruction continues in what could be an infinite regress of dialectical readings.
>
> (Po[ole], 1999: 202–3; original emphasis)

The text and hence also the author thus say more than they know or are consciously aware of. Queer reading accordingly seeks to quarry from the text meanings that open it up to understandings that contest, although without necessarily canceling, ideologically preferred interpretations of the text:

> The main effect of Derrida's deconstructive teaching has been to destroy the naïve assumption that the text has "a" MEANING, which industry, application and attentive good faith will eventually winnow out ... Meaning is not encased or contained in language, but is co-extensive with the play of language itself. ...
>
> (Po[ole], 1999: 203 [word in upper case cross-refers to another entry in this volume])

Accordingly, therefore,

> there is no one guaranteeing "meaning" which inhabits the text and which constitutes its "presence." The link between text and meaning is cut. Authorial intention dissolves in the play of signifiers; the text is seen to subvert its own apparent meaning; and there is no reference from the language of the text to some mystical interior of the text, in which some non-linguistic essence ("meaning") would or could ultimately be found.
>
> (Po[ole], 1999: 203)

If it is the case that there is no guarantee of the singular, unified meaning of the text, however complex or multilayered that meaning might be, then potentially all texts become available to queer readings.

As an example of how a reader or viewer may employ a queer reading and hence experience a queer moment, let us turn to a text that would, at least on the surface, appear to be completely conventional: Gerald Moore's *Am I Too Loud? Memoirs of an accompanist*. Published in the 1960s, this autobiography predates the inception of "queer" as signifying a challenge to the dominant and its orthodoxies. To all intents and purposes, the book is a straightforward account of Moore's life story and his role as the accompanist to many classical musical stars, such as the violinists Jascha Heifetz and Yehudi Menuhin, or the sopranos Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Victoria de los Angeles. Although he mentions that he was married twice, Moore is discreet about his private life, simply expressing in a number of passages throughout the book his warm love for his wife Enid; nor, perhaps, would one expect someone born in England in 1899 to offer a scandalous tell-all narrative about his life. Nevertheless, one may experience a queer moment or two in the course of reading *Am I Too Loud?*

Moore includes in his memoir a chapter on the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, whom he describes as a "young giant ... He is big in every way: physically, intellectually and musically ..." He goes on to observe that Fischer-Dieskau "had only to sing one phrase before I knew I was in the presence of a master." The reverence (which some might characterize as near-adulation) for the singer that these remarks imply is both intensified and modulated by the disclosure that

> Age makes no difference and if anybody can open the door and shed a new light on things I gratefully accept the fresh air and the illumination. I found this with the boy violinist, Josef Hassid, and I find it now with Fischer-Dieskau.
>
> (Moore, 1966: 161).

The phrase "age makes no difference," here applied to how musicians, of whatever age, may learn from one another, has also been used in the context of emotional and sexual relationships, and some readers may find that such a statement begins to color Moore's remarks about Fischer-Dieskau, both

retrospectively and prospectively. The fact that the pianist Moore was signifi-cantly older than the baritone when they first met in 1951 might also influence the way in which one reads the phrase "I found this with the boy violinist ...", suggesting a cross-generational emotional and perhaps sexual attachment, although in fact Moore met Hassid many years earlier, when Moore himself was a younger man. Moore goes on to observe that

> Concerts with him [Fisher-Dieskau] are inspiring experiences, but to me the supreme thrill is rehearsing with him. At rehearsal he is as nervous and transported as an archaeologist bringing along hidden treasure to light. ... He greets me with his cherubic countenance wreathed in smiles, for despite the fierce effort our work requires, mentally and physically, it is anticipated by both of us with keenest pleasure.
>
> This man, Fischer-Dieskau, has taken me deeper into the hearts of Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Brahms than I have ever been before.
>
> (Moore, 1966: 162)

The motifs of being thrilled to be in the other's presence, the smiling greeting, the anticipated "keenest pleasure": these all can be understood not only to qualify Moore's rehearsals with Fischer-Dieskau but to suggest a certain erotic quality to their meetings. This is underscored by the final sentence in the passage quoted above. Although overtly and consciously about music, the phrasing suggests something erotic, even sexual: if one replaces "the hearts of Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Brahms" with something like "the heart of ecstasy" (reminiscent as that phrase may be of the fevers of romance fiction), one sees the erotic potential in that statement.

The point of this exercise has not been to "prove" that Gerald Moore was gay; there is no evidence in the memoir itself of any such sexual orientation. Moreover, in all probability he was unaware of the implications of what he was writing. This is not an example of the *transcoding* of an otherwise heteronormative text so that a gay or lesbian audience might derive pleasure from understanding that text in a subversive way, as Vito Russo demonstrates about film in *The Celluloid Closet: homosexuality in the movies* (Russo, 1987). Rather, the intent has been to show how a queer moment may emerge in the reading of what appears to be otherwise a conventional and unexceptionable text – and to indicate the possible pleasure that one may derive from a reading that opens up the text to a multiplicity of understandings.

More recently, the producers of many texts have often sought to "prequeer" those texts, whether because of a philosophical or personal commitment to the notion of queer, or the desire to be as inclusive as possible in order to attract a wider audience or readership. To take only two brief examples, the TV series *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory* both incorporate queer elements (*Two and a Half Men*, 2003–; *The Big Bang Theory*, 2007–). In each of these, the avowed sexuality of the principal male characters is heterosexual. However, in several episodes of each, one or another of the characters is temporarily recoded as gay.

Thus, for instance, in "Most chicks won't eat veal," the first episode of the first series of *Two and a Half Men*, the brothers Charlie and Alan Harper (played, respectively, by Charlie Sheen and Jon Cryer), who are shopping in a super-market with Alan's 10-year-old son Jake (Angus T. Jones), are mistaken for a gay couple by another shopper, an attractive young woman. This is deeply ironic, since Charlie's womanizing tendencies have already been established for us earlier in the episode.

Likewise, in episode two of the second series of *The Big Bang Theory*, titled "The codpiece topology," we learn that, at Comic-Con (a large convention held in San Diego for comic-book enthusiasts), the Indian astrophysicist Raj Koothrappalli (Kunal Nayyar) mistook someone dressed as an Orion slave girl to be a real woman, only to discover, after buying "her" dinner, that "she" was in fact, as Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg) puts it, "Richard the slave girl."

Such moments of course open up the possibility of queering the characters involved, despite their representation as undeniably heterosexual. However, a more subtle process of queering the characters may be found in the nature of the relationships established among them. Thus, for example, in *Two and a Half Men*, the household set up by the two brothers and Jake mimics and parodies the conventional family households with which we are familiar. The hard-drinking, hard-womanizing Charlie is presented as the "husband" and "father" figure, because it is his house in which the trio live, and his money that supports them. The fussy, weak-willed, economizing (that is, cheap or mean) Alan, who is an actual father, plays the role of the "wife" and "mother." In *The Big Bang Theory*, the household shared by Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) and Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki) reveals a similar dynamic, in that it is the compliant Leonard

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Activity 5.6

- Reflect on any novels, TV series or movies with which you are acquainted and which, in your view, may be queered, or which may offer queer moments:

  - In what does that queering consist? For example, are there char-acters and/or situations that are represented in ways that challenge or undermine an assumed heteronormativity?
  - What pleasure or pleasures might such a reading or understanding offer the reader or viewer?
  - How does such a reading or understanding offer a challenge to the normativization of the masculine and of patriarchy itself?

who must mediate the social norms and protocols around the arrogant and self-regarding Sheldon. This is a role that has traditionally been assigned to women.

Queer theory and queer reading challenge and subvert the authority and control of patriarchy and patriarchal masculinity, querying and undermining both the patriarchal order and the patriarchal economy, which mandate a two-sex, two-gender/two-sexualities-only system, together with the subordination (and oppression, if not also actual suppression) of one term to the other in each category. Although the disruptions to the traditional hierarchy and flows of power offered by queer theory and queer reading may be only provisional (after all, outside such texts patriarchal power continues to function), they weaken patriarchal authority by exposing its vulnerabilities and the fact that its authority and its power are *constructed*, and therefore neither natural nor God-given. To those who may be marginalized or who may feel oppressed by the patriarchal order and its distribution of power, such exposure may bring pleasures above and beyond those offered by a conventional reading of the culture's texts.

The various theories with which this chapter has been concerned can thus be applied to understandings of the patriarchal order and its power that critique that order. By demonstrating that that order's strength is founded on misdirections (the abjecting of elements so as to constitute an out there/in here that in turn produces the "us" of dominant discourse and the "other" excluded from or marginalized by that discourse), silences (including those created by patriarchy's ex-nomination), and the rereading of male homosociality and the culture at large so as to queer them, it becomes possible to challenge the patriarchal order and, to some degree, to undermine it: perhaps even to change it.

Suggested further reading

Hall, D.E. (2003) *Queer Theories*, Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jagose, A. (1986) *Queer Theory*, Carlton South, Victoria (Australia): Melbourne University Press.

Thomas, C. (ed.) (2000) *Straight with a Twist: queer theory and the subject of heterosexuality*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

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