

A Reflection on Women as Female Impersonators

In a recent interview on CSPAN, Anna Quindlen used the phrase *female impersonators* in reference to women and attributed the phrase to Gloria Steinem. Steinem, in an interview in *Mother Jones* magazine, appears to use the term to refer to the socialization of women beginning at about 12 to 13 years of age. A partial quote "... when you were 9 or 10 or 11, and maybe you were this tree-climbing, shit-free little girl...and then at 12 or 13 you suddenly turned into a female impersonator..."

Alan Johnson in his book *Gender Knot* argues that feminine gender behavior is a social construct. What Johnson argues is that society is a male-dominated and male-centered social order. In such a social order men operating through social institutions have the power to define social roles. Thus, in his view, the behaviors associated with the feminine gender role are in whole or part determined by men. These behaviors include such things as speech, dress, attitudes and mannerisms to name the more obvious. It is likely that these role behaviors are at root based in biological differences, such as reproductive functions, reproductive strategies, physical attributes like strength and dexterity and possibly differences in brain organization affecting such things as verbal skills and emotional intelligence. Even assuming some root biological basis, socially defined femininity in a male-dominated society will be influenced by what men view as feminine, not necessarily what women might view as feminine.

Likewise in a society dominated and defined by men, masculinity will also be determined by men. Again, it is likely that there will be some root biological basis for the masculine role behaviors associated with masculinity but how these are articulated culturally has a great deal of latitude, as is true in the feminine case as well. One of the attitudes that masculinity is imbued with in a male-centered society is an orientation toward women as sexual objects, which is a common complaint from women about the social role they have been assigned. Thus, it seems likely that one of the reciprocal effects of "women as sex objects" is a corresponding subset of male defined feminine role behavior. Looking beyond this likely influence on femininity as a socially defined set of role behaviors that articulate gender in a male-centered society, it is unclear to what extent other gender linked behaviors are reflective of female behavioral tendencies whose explication have been controlled by women and to what extent they are influenced by the power of male-centered society to define appropriate gender behavior. Ultimately, social definition of gender roles will be a "dance" between the two biological sexes but one in which men have historically led.

Female impersonation then captures the role played by many if not most women in a male-centered society. That is, acting out the role of male defined femininity due to an unequal balance of social power between the sexes and a lack of a viable alternative. That many women embrace this role construction and even take satisfaction in it does not alter the fact that it is at least in part a male defined construct. There are, however, many women who are not entirely comfortable with this definition of femininity or who resist it both covertly and overtly. The latter are the women most likely to be attracted to feminism as a political movement, which appears to be an attempt to rebalance the power relationship between men and women. Such a rebalancing opens the possibility for a redefinition of social organization but also leaves open the

possibility of simply allowing women, who wish to do so, to participate more fully in the hierarchical power relationships that presently underlie society.

While this latter outcome certainly provides women with greater access to both economic and political power, the former could lead to a transformation of society. Evolutionary psychology suggests that men have evolved to organize themselves into hierarchical social structures that are predicated on status competition, dominance and the exercise of power. Perhaps the quintessential such model for this is military organization. Women who succeed in such an organization must "play the game" and become *male impersonators* or never make any real progress toward achieving significant organizational power. Whether this is a viable route to social equality remains to be seen. However, evolutionary psychology also suggests that women have evolved to organize themselves into lateral social structures that are predicated on cooperation, mutuality and the exercise of support. Assuming there is a factual basis for this hypothesis, it seems unlikely that most women will find male impersonation and competing in a dominance hierarchy appealing.

If it comes down to an overt "battle of the sexes" over who will determine social organization, it would appear that men have the advantage for evolutionary reasons as is evident from their historical dominance. Thus, it may be that women who simply play the game for personal advantage may enjoy some success but are unlikely to change the system in any substantive manner. On the other hand, if women who are successful at playing the game act as a "fifth column" that undertakes a covert strategy to change organizational structures they may succeed. Women who achieve organizational power should be in a position to plant seeds that could take root and grow into lateral networks in which cooperative strategies are as important to success as competitive strategies. This has potential as a strategy for change to the extent that current circumstances represent conditions in which such strategies confer an advantage on the society that embraces them. Such a society would reflect a merging of organizational styles rather than a dominance of a particular organizational style.

Since the label *female impersonator* when used in conversational speech most commonly evokes the idea of male to female impersonation, it might be appropriate to make a closing comment on this use of the phrase. There are, of course, men who adopt female gender behaviors, especially those of dress, speech and mannerisms. Many such men consider themselves transgendered and have, to varying degrees, a female sex identity, which is probably rooted in neurobiology and underlies their desire to adopt to varying degree a female gender identity.

Such individuals have at times been the subject of hostile comments from "feminists." The reason for this might be deduced from the above reflections. It would appear that these individuals are viewed as members of the "oppressive" sex who are reflecting in their behavior some of the most observable aspects of the feminine gender identity that most feminists are resisting to one degree or another. To the extent these feminists see their "mission" to be to redefine femininity they find male impersonation of that traditional definition of femininity objectionable. Thus, instead of seeing these men as potential allies, who too are "victims" of a male-centered cultural stereotype, they are seen as possibly worse than men who simply conform to a male-centered masculine identity. These male female impersonators seem to be a visual taunt or seen as a caricature. The better it is done the more like a taunt it appears and the worse it

is done the more like a caricature it seems. When perceived as a caricature, it is likely due to either ineptitude or the lack of the physical characteristics needed to "pull off" an approximation that is at least not ludicrous. In neither case, is it likely that what is perceived is what is intended.

In defense of men with mixed gender identity, they are exposed to the same models of femininity as are women in this society. That they mimic the prevalent model is no more a failing in them than it is in the typical woman. Further, it is unlikely that mere adoption by such men of the prevalent model is done in a deliberate effort to make either a cultural or political statement to women. Finally, due to the identity conflicts implied by their behavior, they are probably less able to see through the imposed feminine stereotype than is the typical woman. It is unreasonable to expect anything different from such men until a socially viable alternative femininity is constructed by women who see through the stereotype, are dissatisfied with it and can resist being co-opted by the hierarchical power-centered structure of a male-dominated society. In the meantime male female impersonators will, no doubt, continue to use the best expressive medium available to them for the explication of their sense of female sex identity.

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