

THE  
POLITICS OF  
REALITY:  
ESSAYS IN  
FEMINIST  
THEORY

**BY  
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and law-abiding citizens, and lesbians feminists are sinners and criminals, or, if perceived politically, insurgents and traitors.

4. Given the sharpness of the male/female and masculine/feminine dualism of phallographic thought, woman-hating is an obvious corollary of man-loving.

Contempt for women is such a common thing in this culture that it is sometimes hard to see. It is expressed in a great deal of what passes for humor, and in most popular entertainment. Its presence also in high culture and scholarship has been documented exhaustively by feminist scholars in every field. It is promoted by the advertising and fashion industries. All heterosexual pornography, including man-made so-called "lesbian" pornography for male audiences, exhibits absolutely uncompromising woman-hating.<sup>1</sup> Athletics coaches and military drill sergeants express their disgust when their charges perform inadequately by calling them "women," "ladies," "girls" and other more derogatory names for females.

Woman-hating is a major part of what supports male-supremacy; its functions in phallographic society are many. Among other things, it supports male solidarity by setting women both apart from and below men. It helps to maintain a clear and definitive boundary between the male "us" and its corresponding "them," and it helps to sustain the illusion of superiority which motivates loyalty. Men not uncommonly act out contempt for women ritually to express and thereby reconfirm for themselves and each other their manhood, that is, their loyal partisanship of the male "us" and their rights to the privileges of membership. This is one of the functions of the exchanges of "conquest" stories, of casual derogation, gang rape, and other such small and large atrocities.<sup>2</sup>

In a woman-hating culture, one of the very nasty things that can happen to a man is his being treated or seen as a woman, or womanlike. This degradation makes him a proper object of rape and derision, and reverses for him the presumption of civil rights. This dreadful fate befalls gay men. In the

society at large, if it is known that a man is gay, he is subject to being pegged at the level of sexual status, personal authority and civil rights which are presumptive for women. This is, of course, really quite unfair, for most gay men are quite as fully *men* as any men: being gay is not at all inconsistent with being loyal to masculinity and committed to contempt for women. Some of the very things which lead straight people to doubt gay men's manhood are, in fact, proofs of it.

One of the things which persuades the straight world that gay men are not really men is the effeminacy of style of some gay men and the gay institution of the impersonation of women, both of which are associated in the popular mind with male homosexuality. But as I read it, gay men's effeminacy and donning of feminine apparel displays no love of or identification with women or the womanly.

For the most part, this femininity is affected and is characterized by theatrical exaggeration. It is a casual and cynical mockery of women, for whom femininity is the trappings of oppression, but it is also a kind of play, a toying with that which is taboo. It is a naughtiness indulged in, I suspect, more by those who believe in their immunity to contamination than by those with any doubts or fears. Cocky lads who are sure of their immortality are the ones who do acrobatics on the ledge five stories above the pavement. What gay male affectation of femininity seems to me to be is a kind of serious sport in which men may exercise their power and control over the feminine, much as in other sports one exercises physical power and control over elements of the physical universe. Some gay men achieve, indeed, prodigious mastery of the feminine, and they are often treated by those in the know with the respect due to heroes.\* But the mastery of the feminine is not feminine. It is masculine. It is not a manifestation of

\* Female-impersonators are a staple in the entertainment provided at gay bars and clubs, and they play to a very appreciative audience. Their skill is recognized and admired. The best of them travel around, like other entertainers, and their stage names are well known all over the country. They are idols of a sort.

woman-loving but of woman-hating. Someone with such mastery may have the very first claim to manhood.

All this suggests that there is more than a little truth in the common claim that homophobia belongs most to those least secure in their masculinity. Blatant and flagrant gay male effeminacy ridicules straight men's anxious and superstitious avoidance of the feminine.<sup>3</sup> And there are gay men who are inclined to cheer this account, to feel smug and delighted at an analysis like this which suggests that they are superior to other men, that is, superior in their masculinity. They clearly reveal thereby that they do indeed pass the Contempt-for-Women test of manhood.<sup>4</sup>

*for example?* (There is a gentler politic which lies behind some gay men's affectation of the feminine. It can be a kind of fun which involves mockery not of women or of straight men but of the whole institution of gender—a deliberately irreverent fooling around with one of the most sacred foolishnesses of phallic culture. This may be the necessarily lighthearted political action of a gender rebel rather than an exercise of masculinity. Certain kinds of lightheartedness in connection with what is, after all, the paraphernalia of women's oppression can become a rather bad joke. But when the silliness stays put as a good joke on patriarchy it betrays a potentially revolutionary levity about the serious matter of manhood and thus may express a politics more congenial to feminism than most gay politics.)

One might have hoped that since gay men themselves can be, in a way, victims of woman-hating, they might have come to an unusual identification with women and hence to political alliance with them. This is a political possibility which is in some degree actualized by some gay men, but for most, such identification is really impossible. They know, even if not articulately, that their classification with women is based on a profound misunderstanding. Like most other men who for one reason or another get a taste of what it's like to be a woman in a woman-hating culture, they are inclined to protest, not the injustice of anyone ever being treated so shabbily,

but the injustice of their being treated so when they are not women. The straight culture's identification of gay men with women usually only serves to intensify gay men's investment in their difference and distinction from the female other.

What results is not alliance with women but strategies designed to demonstrate publicly gay men's identification with men, as over and against women. Such strategies must involve one form or another of public acting out of male-dominance and female-subordination.

It is not easy to find ways to stage public actions and appearances which present simultaneously the gayness of gay men and their correct male-supremacist contempt for women. Affected effeminacy does display this, but it is popularly misunderstood. It would be perfect if some of the many gay men who are married would appear with their wives on talk shows where the men would talk animatedly about the joys of loving men and their wives would smile and be suitably supportive, saying they only want their husbands to be happy. But there will not be many volunteers for this work. Who then are the women who will appear slightly to the side of and slightly behind gay men, representing the female other in the proper relation and contrast to their manhood? Lesbians, of course. Gay men can credibly present themselves as men, that is, as beings defined by superiority to women, if there are lesbians in the gay rights movement—given only that males are always or almost always in the visible position of leadership. By having females around, visible but in subordinate positions, gay men can publicly demonstrate their separation and distinction from women and their "appropriate" attitude toward women, which is, at bottom, woman-hating.<sup>5</sup>

Gay male culture and the male gay rights movement, in their publicly visible manifestations, seem to conform quite nicely to the fundamental male-supremacist principle of woman-hating. Anyone who has hung around a gay bar would expect as much: gay men, like other men, commonly, casually and cheerfully make jokes which denigrate and vilify women, women's bodies, women's genitals.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in some circles,



contempt for women and physical disgust with female bodies are overtly accepted as just the other side of the coin of gay men's attraction to men.

5. The fifth of the principles of male-supremacy which I listed was the principle of compulsory heterosexuality. It is a rule about having sex, that is, about "missionary" fucking. This activity is generally compulsory for males in this culture. Fucking is a large part of how females are kept subordinated to males. It is a ritual enactment of that subordination which constantly reaffirms the fact of subordination and habituates both men and women to it, both in body and in imagination. It is also one of the components of the system of behavior and values which constitutes compulsory motherhood for women. A great deal of fucking is also presumed to preserve and maintain women's belief in their own essential heterosexuality, which in turn (for women as not for men) connects with and reinforces female hetero-eroticism, that is, man-loving in women. It is very important to the maintenance of male-supremacy that men fuck women, a lot. So it is required; it is compulsory. Doing it is both doing one's duty and an expression of solidarity. A man who does not or will not fuck women is not pulling his share of the load. He is not a loyal and dependable member of the team.

Some gay men certainly are deviants in this respect, and would lobby for tolerance of their deviance without the penalties now attached to it. They would break a rule of phallogocracy, but in many cases they are loathe to do their duty only because they have learned all too well their lessons in woman-hating. Their reluctance to play out this part of manhood is due only to an imbalance, where the requisite woman-hating has taken a form and reached an intensity which puts it in tension with this other requirement of manhood. Such divergence of gay life from male-supremacist culture clearly is not a turning from fundamental male-supremacist values, so much as it is a manifestation of the tensions internal to those values.

The unwillingness of some gay men to engage in fucking women seems not to be central to male homosexuality, to "gayness," as it is presented and defended by the male gay rights movement. The latter seems for the most part tolerant of the requirement of heterosexuality; its spokesmen seem to demand merely that men not be limited to heterosexuality, that is, that genital contact and intercourse be permitted as part of their homoerotic relations with other men. They point out that a great many gay men are married, and that many men who engage in what is called homosexuality also do fuck women—that is, they are "normal" and dutiful men. They point out how many gay men are fathers. I do not pretend to know the demographics here: how many gay men do fuck women or have impregnated women, nor even how many are committed to this line of persuasion in their roles as gay rights activists. But this is one of the themes in gay rights rhetoric. Men who take such a line are, again, no particular political allies of women. They maintain their solidarity with other men in respect of this aspect of keeping the system going, and only want credit for it in spite of some of their other activities and proclivities.

6. We now come to the only one of the fundamental principles of male-supremacist culture and society where there really is an interesting divergence between it and the values and principles of what it labels male homosexuality. Even here, the situation is ambiguous, for the male gay rights movement only wants too much of something that is really already very dear to straight men.

Men in general in this culture consider themselves, in virtue of their genital maleness, to have a right to access to whatever they want. The kinds of limitations they recognize to this general accessibility of the universe to them are limitations imposed by other men through such things as systems of private property, the existence of the state, and the rules and rituals of limitations of violence among men. In their identification with Mankind, they recognize no limitations whatsoever.