



## Marsden and Masculinity: A Gender Analysis of *Dear Miffy*

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As we approach the millenium we see manhood being redefined in the wake of chronic identity confusion, with males allegedly disoriented by a number of changes in social structures and practices. As it is beaten up in the popular press, for instance, men are supposedly cut adrift from a male lineage, no longer part of a community, no longer bonded to other men or capable of lasting relationships with women. Indeed, in an age in which many girls in particular seem to have profited from the advances of second-wave feminism, and have propelled, even jackbooted themselves into spheres previously considered exclusively male domains, boys are frequently considered to be marooned, deeply disoriented and confused about identity, sexuality, direction and purpose. As the media so insistently portrays it, twenty years after the feminist movement there is a new generation of assertive, high-achieving girls who appear to be swamping boys socially and academically, and these confident, assured and purposeful girls contrast with males who lack role models and are exhausted and disempowered in a climate of gender dislocation. And yet other socio-economic factors are clearly also at work: most notably the impact of the policies of economic rationalism, which has ensured that jobs traditionally held by males have become increasingly economically irrelevant or obsolete, and many of the things which have sustained masculine identity in the industrial age, like lifelong employment and a pride in a particular skill or craft, have disappeared. All this is too often conveniently forgotten in a simplistic, oppositional analysis which focuses upon so-called new 'gender inequalities'.

This is not to deny, however, that there is a real problem out there. Tony, the protagonist in John Marsden's *Dear Miffy*, is the epitome of this new lost generation of Australian boys. He fits the criteria of 'protest masculinity' as initially defined by Alfred Adler and redefined by Bob Connell (Connell 1995, pp.93-110), because he is a boy growing up without any expectation of the stable employment around which familiar models of working-class masculinity have traditionally been organised, and he faces instead intermittent unemployment and economic marginalisation. Schooling is not an empowering experience for Tony, who defines his masculinity against institutional authority (his defiance is more successful

here than in the home, where his uncle thrashes him routinely). He follows the established protest masculinity pattern of violence, school resistance, drug/alcohol use, potential to slip into minor crime, and brief heterosexual liaisons (prior to and including Miffy). Tony's masculinity is violent and aggressive, and his pre-Miffy relationships with girls are textbook protest masculinity material—casual, exploitative, easy, enthusiastic 'stick-it-up-them' affairs without any emotional intimacy (Connell 1995, pp.103-4). His disadvantaged and deprived childhood as well as his adolescent experience of powerlessness lead to an exaggerated claim to masculinity of the frenzied and showy nature as defined by Connell, but this is also clearly a subordinated masculinity, shaped as it is by class deprivation and having little access to cultural and economic resources. For Tony, masculinity becomes a performance, a spectacular display embracing the marginality and the stigma and turning them to account, a stereotyped hyper-masculinity which contrasts with the wider range of roles now available to girls, and which, as both Connell and Marsden so clearly reveal, is ultimately only a cul-de-sac. An interesting comparison is the film *The Full Monty*, where traditional working-class masculinity has been destroyed and replaced by an entrepreneurial culture which supplies a performative self—if only as a temporary bolster against long-term unemployment. Yet whereas *The Full Monty* is a 'feel-good' movie which ultimately celebrates the manner in which working-class men can rise from a position where they are bankrupt of hope, ambition and opportunity to one in which they gain self-respect as well as the respect of family and friends, Marsden's novel offers a much bleaker view of males, relationships and class. While *The Full Monty* contains a poignant mix of comedy and pathos, an upbeat ending and a gently optimistic social realism, *Dear Miffy* demonstrates that Tony is in a 'no win' situation, victimised by both his gender and his socio-economic circumstances.

Tony is a pertinent example of Connell's 'live fast and die young' model of masculinity. As a typical male at risk, he refers casually but significantly to 'my balancing act on that concrete wall above the freeway' on the first page of the text (Marsden 1997, p.1), and his rebelliousness is highlighted on the very next page: '... you don't want to

spend the best years of your life sitting in a straight line, talking in a straight line, walking in a straight line' (Marsden 1997, p.2). He plays the 'tough guy' role for all it is worth, knowing that the façade and bluster mask a very real vulnerability on his part. Yet while Tony's distinctive form of masculinity may be understood in terms of Connell's social analysis of gender relations, he can also be 'read' in terms of other, more populist and polemic (and, arguably, posturing) responses to this crisis of masculinities in Western societies. Robert Bly and his Australian disciple, Steve Biddulph, with their hugely popular narratives of male identity and male redemption, focus in a self-absorbed fashion upon the injuries and costs of masculinity, and constitute men and boys as the new disadvantaged. According to one critic, these 'backlash blockbusters' (Mills 1997, p.11) fulfil a certain bardic function, singing back to society lullabies about what a large section and hegemonic part of it 'already knows', thus reinforcing those beliefs and working against any attempts to alter social patterns of gender relations (McCarthy 1998, p.83). Of course this function is also performed in articles in the popular press, as indicated at the beginning of this paper.

Bly and Biddulph argue that there is a core personality and character which defines masculinity that all men potentially share, which has been lost in history, in the crisis of the modern world, and this is perhaps best expressed as a kind of repressed cultural memory (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p.31). Their discourse is couched in terms of an essentialist masculinity where biological and psychological determinants become the driving force for a boy's development, a masculinity seen in generalist terms of an overarching mythology—it is *never* culturally constructed, as David Buchbinder reminds us (Buchbinder 1998, p.39)—and a restoration of a tribalised community with formal rites of passage to initiate a young man into manhood. They argue that men, victims of a reversion of the traditional gender roles created by the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s, have become 'soft' because they are no longer in touch with the 'deep masculine' within them, and they need to recuperate this by importing the knowledge of ancient and exotic myths and rituals. The so-called 'deep masculine' is a primitive and true radiant energy that all

men instinctively know and possess, the 'wild man' or 'inner warrior' whom the allegedly effeminating culture of late capitalism has locked in a cage.

And so in *Iron John*, for instance, Bly offers a kind of 'poetics of masculinity', a composite map of the mythical journeys of male heroes drawn from a range of cultures and literatures (very like Joseph Campbell's *Hero With A Thousand Faces*), simultaneously deploring the loss of the tribal masculine in the evolution of industrial and post-industrial, capitalist and consumer society. This fiction of a golden age for men, this lost ideal, involves a romanticising of the place of men in traditional society, and is a touching portrait but is also, to put it bluntly, historical nonsense. It has been described as 'a cross between the primitivism of *The Planet of the Apes* and the anachronism of *The Flintstones*' (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p.34), and it is fed by a rejection of contemporary society, and a longing for a world that is not fragmented, chaotic and incoherent, where the 'natural' gender order is played out in Garden of Eden simplicity (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p.95).

Marsden's novel reinforces that polarisation of the sexes not only characteristic of Bly and Biddulph, but also of other best-sellers such as John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. He doesn't appear to share Bly's and Biddulph's reverence for historically outmoded and culturally inappropriate rites of passage, their nostalgic vision of a 'once-and-future primitive utopia with lots of male-centred rituals' (Buchbinder 1998, p.47), nor does he argue specifically for a return to the 'deep masculine', together with the trivialising of the myths, the tales and the initiation rituals, those decontextualised 'cultural plunderings' (Buchbinder 1998, p.40) that seem to go with the territory. Yet while he does not appear to share the misinformed naivete of an idealised pre-lapsarian male existence of dubious and superficial anthropological authenticity, in *Secret Men's Business* (in many ways a blueprint or palimpsest for *Dear Miffy*) Marsden does gesture towards Bly's insistence upon rituals by urging boys to discover their manhood by discovering something difficult to conquer, and then to celebrate in some memorable fashion the testing and demonstration of their courage (Marsden 1998, pp.26-31). He links too with the traditional notion that manhood is an achievement not a

given, and that it must be earned, won, fought for through various trials and ritualised sufferings. He seems to acknowledge that the 'nowhere boys' of the late twentieth century have no rites into masculinity, only those impoverished totems of disadvantaged males, like getting 'pissed', and becoming involved with drugs and sex. And although in *Secret Men's Business* Marsden treats masculinity as a monolithic concept, with little notion of the difference that cultural markers like class, race and ethnicity generate in socio-cultural constructs of identity, this is not so much the case in *Dear Miffy*, where rigid class demarcations clearly underlie its flat and stereotyped representations of the haves and the have-nots. Men of all classes, however, are 'soft males' who come off badly in this text. Tony comes to realise that his 'scungy world full of shit where you fought in the gutter to stay alive' (p.48) has its parallels in the upper-middle class world of Miffy's father, that it is all 'really rotten underneath' (p.49). Despite the façade of the BMWs, the grand house and the glamorous lifestyle, this moody and silent parent, the doctor-paedophile, is a weak man, susceptible to illegal and immoral desires, and part of a family scandal that no-one speaks about, but which has tainted all their lives. Unlike the economically disadvantaged Tony, however, Miffy's father is able to buy his way out of trouble.

Marsden's biggest borrowing from the Men's Movement theorists concerns the discourse, the set of dogmas about the father. Fathers are the central plank in the men's movement, and 'father hunger', or the need to revitalise manhood, is seen as essential for healing the wounded nature of modern masculinity. According to Robert Bly, since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the 'love unit most damaged ... has been the father-son bond' (Bly 1990, p.19), whose health is decisive for the production of a strong, healthy male. If a boy is somehow separated from his father, this break becomes a source of immense emotional damage. According to Biddulph, 'father hunger is the deep biological need for strong, humorous, hairy, wild, tender, sweaty, caring, intelligent masculine output, as a starting point for most men in their journey to health' (Biddulph 1994, p.31), and a boy's father is his emotional line of contact to his masculinity: 'You can't get on with your life until you have understood him, forgiven him and come, in some way, to respect him' (Biddulph 1994, p.40). A simplistic narrative of personal

redemption follows on from this: 'Make sure you fix it with your father ... if you are at war with him in your head, you are at war with masculinity itself' (Biddulph 1994, p.40). According to Bly, Biddulph and the mythopoetic gang, boys and men need to become one with the father and to be initiated into the father's world in order to be 'healed'. Biddulph argues that 'your father is the person who first and most powerfully "taught" you what manhood means. He did this just by being your father. Like it or not, he is in your head and in your sinews and your nerves forever' (Biddulph 1994, p.51). And so the father is a kind of doorway through which the son must pass, and if the doorway cannot be found but is closed for some historical or personal reason, then the son suffers the condition of ongoing and chronic immaturity, living life as an Oedipal man, effeminate (if the mother is allowed to dominate), incapacitated by guilt, and alienated from his own masculinity.

*Dear Miffy* is a text about father hunger, and indeed inadequate fathers occur frequently in Marsden's fiction, as far back as *So Much to Tell You* (1987). When, for instance, legless, institutionalised Tony is told that he has a visitor, he hopes that it will be his father, but instead it is his teacher (Marsden 1997, p.85). Although he assumes a total lack of interest in Hammond's talk (yet another performance), he then makes an unexpected effort in the gym—and magically, if temporarily, he is no longer in denial. He is, after all, at that third stage of development described by Biddulph and Bly when the boy needs input from male mentors if he is to complete the journey into being fully grown up, rather than relying upon his ill-equipped peer group for his sense of self (Biddulph 1997, p.7). Throughout the text, at a time when Tony should be learning skills, responsibility and self-respect by joining with more and more adult males, they are almost always absent or deficient in important ways. Too often they are callous brutes who act upon impulse, 'nowhere men' who deny their fathering role and thereby have a detrimental influence upon the 'nowhere sons' who stumble after them.

Biddulph considers that at the present moment, 'Boys in Australia are horrendously under-fathered and are not given the processes or the mentor figures to help their growth into mature men' (Biddulph 1994, p.3). Elsewhere he talks about Dad Deficiency Disorder, declaring that this is often the real cause of Attention Deficit Disorder

(Biddulph 1997, p.18), and he argues that boys with absent fathers are statistically more likely to be violent, get hurt, get into trouble, do poorly in schools and be members of teenage gangs in adolescence (Biddulph 1997, p.81), conveniently forgetting to acknowledge that factors such as poverty and socio-economic circumstances in many single-parent households are also crucially responsible for this. In general, in Biddulph's estimation, underfathered boys have no self-control and no inner calmness: 'A boy knows that he is turning into a man. He has to "download the software" from an available male to complete his development' (Biddulph 1997, p.17). In this same vein, Marsden, addressing boys directly in *Secret Men's Business*, reiterates the need for a father 'to take an interest in you, give you good advice, show you their love and respect, someone you can talk to about anything' (Marsden 1998, p. 93). And so if a boy has a poor father he might have to put a lot of energy and effort into changing him (Marsden 1998, p.95) or, echoing Bly's idea of transcending the alienation of the personal father through surrogate fathering or mentoring if the directly patrilinear approach is unsuccessful, a boy should adopt another who can spend time with him. (This is, however, not possible in *Dear Miffy*, as Tony's uncle and Miffy's father offer very poor masculine role models. Only the teacher figure offers hope, but Tony is too negative to seek solace there—though he does take pride in the fact that he could, if he tried, be a top student). Most difficult of all, a boy can father himself, stepping back and viewing his actions from a new point of view, and asking what advice a good father would have in a certain situation (Marsden 1998, p.98). Sadly, Tony is incapable of doing this. It seems clear that Marsden endorses the notion that special mentors who care personally for young boys and help them move gradually into the adult world are essential for a young man's well-being. Boys like Tony lack direction because they have no mentors at all, and, to adopt Biddulph's clichéd prose, they subsequently fall into a lot of potholes on the road to adulthood (Biddulph 1997, p.29).

In *Secret Men's Business* Marsden reinforces Bly's notion that a relationship with his father will inevitably involve conflict: 'your father may have been the only sexually potent male in the house up until now, and he could feel threatened' (Marsden 1998, p.3). In order to become your

own person, to move on, to achieve, you need to 'defeat your father—in a field in which you have always thought him to be superior, and in an area which is important and powerful to you both'. Then the son gains maturity and individuality, with unique strengths and skills very different to his father (Marsden 1998, p.19), and avoids over-dependence upon his father, and the emotional immaturity that goes with it. Like Bly, Marsden doesn't see the son as simply recreating the traditional pattern and propping up the ailing patriarchy; he notes that men didn't show their feelings in the past (Marsden 1998, p.90), and were not nurturers, and he attempts to rescue boys from their fathers' shortcomings. Like Bly's rhetoric about the limitations of 'the 50s male', or the man traditionally exiled from his own emotions (Bly 1990, p.2), Marsden acknowledges the need for boys to confront their feelings and acknowledge and express themselves in meaningful ways (Marsden 1998, p.49), to be more communicative and avoid the emotional constipation of the past, that celebrated male culture of silence and emotional repression which is really a profound lack of connection with the self and others. He also encourages talking about suicidal feelings (Marsden 1998, p.162), and wants boys generally to become more assertive, sensitive and spiritual. And where *Dear Miffy* perhaps succeeds for some teenage readers is as a love story for boys, with Tony's half incoherent 'thinking out loud' best interpreted as an inarticulate boy attempting to rid himself of his emotional autism. As Tony puts it:

*Trouble is, I've never been a talker. You gotta learn how to talk, I reckon. I don't mean just jabber on about footy and shit; I mean talk the way you did, about yourself and stuff that happens and whether you should do this or that or something else. I found that pretty fucking hard. still do.*  
(p.55).

For some readers, then, Tony's awkward, mawkish, not very well expressed protestations of love for Miffy ring true, while for others the text is embarrassingly voyeuristic, salacious, titillating, or simply in bad taste.

The attitudes towards women (especially mothers) expressed in Marsden's text also replicate those of Bly and Biddulph, attitudes which at best can be described as

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distrustful, at worst as downright misogynist. While Men's Movement texts like Bly's and Biddulph's routinely say that they aren't against feminism and women, and that they are instead offering men positive ways of responding to the feminist challenge by reaffirming that masculinity is a positive, life-affirming force and bringing this to the fore (Biddulph 1994, p.25), they nonetheless talk about the feminising of men as a shameful thing, and the perpetually apologetic SNAG is a figure of fun, a wimp overly dependent upon mother and wife, and boys are counselled not to be 'mummy's boys'. Biddulph, for instance, points to the figure of Woody Allen, discredited SNAG (1994, p.28). It is surely significant that Tony's father can't take Tony back, because his new woman won't allow it - thus demonstrating yet another instance of women's power over weakened men. And so the contemporary adult 'soft male' (with all his associations of penile droop) is unhappy, lacking in energy, vague and indecisive and ineffective, compared with the bold, empowered women about him.

According to Bly, the boy needs to break away from the world of the mother in order to bond with the father and enter the world of men, with the assistance of the father and the older men, so he can take into himself the 'King', the archetypal male principle (Bly 1990, pp.93-122). According to Biddulph, problems began with boys being raised by women, instead of growing up with the 'sweetness of male teaching from several older men who took pride and placed great store in their maturation. Unless the tribe or village raised good men, everyone's life was endangered' (Biddulph 1994, p.30). Biddulph cites approvingly the example of the Lakota Native Indian tribe (most recently famous through Kevin Costner's film *Dances With Wolves*) where fourteen year-old boys undergo a 'vision quest' after which they are not permitted to speak directly to their mother for two whole years until a ceremonial rejoining of the parent and child-now-adult (Biddulph 1997, p.22). This ritual is contrasted with the plight of uninitiated modern-day sons who never really escape their mothers, have never entered the community of men, and relate to all women in a dependent and immature way. Once again, as Gilbert and Gilbert point out, Biddulph forgets that masculine rites in traditional, male-dominated societies imposed conformity

and control, and involved misogynist myths, the exclusion of women, deference to hierarchical authority, and fear, violence and pain (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p.31).

Moreover, nowhere is there a sentimental idealisation of the mother figure, or a narrative of mother hunger, because for these theorists a mythic initiation into masculinity necessarily involves a separation from femininity to find that deeper masculine truth. There are instead the assumptions that masculinity must always be reactive to femininity and the mother, and that, despite counter-claims that masculinity is actually constructed by interaction with women (Connell 1995, p.84), the process of healing must be undertaken in a single-sex grouping. The conservative Men's Movement judges women, especially mothers, but also female teachers and the feminisation of pedagogy (especially in the so-called 'What about the boys?' debate in educational circles) to be at the heart of the contemporary problems with boys; it sees little need of them past the very early years of potty-training and nurturing (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p.94).

And so strong, capable mums are warned by Biddulph not to displace their husbands by getting 'too close' to the kids, and are advised to be content to take a back seat while their sons approach their adulthood. In *Raising Boys* Biddulph even includes a letter from a grateful woman who has undergone a conversion after reading his earlier book, and has allowed her husband to take over the upbringing of their sons: 'we convince ourselves we are a vital bridge between our husbands and sons, when in fact we have become a barrier', she says (Biddulph 1997, p.101). It is evident that young men have to leave the world of women to break the mother-mould and therefore begin the transforming journey. Meanwhile in *Dear Miffy* Tony's mother, strong enough to leave the family and strip them of their possessions (even down to his baby brother's toys), is surely yet another woman who has sapped the energy of the men about her. Tony thinks of her with bitterness and hate, but never with the longing and yearning which is reserved for the absent father. Additionally, Miffy's mother, with her 'super-cool super-polite voice' (p.67), who patronises him and grills him about his address, his prospects and his likelihood of a tertiary career, and at a crucial moment accuses him of being 'filth' (p.84), is directly responsible for his

institutionalisation. And finally Miffy, too, can be construed as yet another of these strong females, manipulating men to serve their own ends, encouraging Tony to become emotionally involved with her and using Tony's low socio-economic class and status to say 'fuck you' (p.61) to her parents, and yet ultimately, when faced with Tony's violence, she aligns herself alongside her own class and gender, screaming at Tony like he was 'a monster or something ... It sounded like your mother all over again' (p.84). With the significant realisation that he has been betrayed not only by his mother but by his girlfriend as well, Tony ends his letters in a torrent of obscene abuse. While men are never there when they are needed, women have the habit of getting in the way. In the end Tony is neutered—literally as well as figuratively—by his involvement with women from the right side of the tracks.

In the good old days, males had a pretty clear vision of what a man was. In the nineties the emphasis is upon male victimhood, internalised oppression, and questions of self-destruction and violence. So-called New Age philosophies, particularly those dealing with mythological approaches like Joseph Campbell's *Hero With A Thousand Faces* and Freudian, Jungian and pop psychology, appear to have replaced the religious ideologies of earlier eras in what could be described as a search for meaning in a post-Christian age. The self-appointed guardians of male spirituality in particular regard masculinity as a fragile and vulnerable commodity. They stress the importance of reconnecting with absent fathers and with myths and images of a powerful, effective masculinity. They emphasise the primacy of process, arguing that a full masculinity must be fought for, that men need 'real mentoring' in an age of discredited ritual and spiritual experience. If, as is argued here, the Men's Movement can be seen as an attempt to recoup and reconsolidate the masculine prerogatives that have been threatened by feminist critiques, and one which repeatedly positions men as victims of feminism, *Dear Miffy* is a case-book study which results in a boy's symbolic castration. By diluting the opinions/theories of Robert Bly and Steve Biddulph and utilising them in his works, Marsden proves that he is the 'real' Iron John after all. *Dear Miffy* is about a boy who climbs into a first class carriage by mistake (Marsden 1997, p.106). He should have

approached the engine driver, because he has known the answers all along.

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