Gendering Talk
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Making Women Look Bad

ONE EVENING IN THE EARLY 1960s I WAS WATCHING A TV VARIETY SHOW WITH my dad, who was as sweet, intelligent, and fair-minded a man as I have ever known. As a singer was introduced he commented: “Awful good-looking for a colored girl.” I was appalled at this utterance and I told him so. I tried to explain that the word “colored” sounded insulting. Dad was not convinced, but he listened to me. The event stuck in my mind because it is one of the few times I have tried to correct someone’s speech—let alone to correct an elder relative.

Not until many years later did I consider Dad’s gendering talk in this utterance. The word “girl” may sound demeaning, but the real kicker is the speaker’s presumption that a singer’s looks are more worthy of comment than her voice. By accident, and intending to praise the singer, this tenderly sweet man demeaned the singer both as a person of color and as a woman. Speakers often use language resources, without malice or conscious thought, to make women look bad. Speakers, especially, do this through:

• talk that describes women in negative terms, and
• talk about women’s appearance.

Ironically, our language features allow us to make women look bad, while our cultural practices obligate women to look beautiful. These two issues are connected, as are gender-differentiating talk and our belief in sex differences.

Describing Women

Certain bits of English usage indicate something derogatory about a woman, or about women in general. Using these features contributes to appearances that women are lesser beings than men. Linguist Robin Lakoff illustrates the derogation of women by comparing pairs of similar words in masculine and feminine forms.¹ The feminine terms in each such pair carry comparatively negative connotations, and derogatory secondary meanings.

[1] Lakoff, 1975

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>master</td>
<td>mistress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td>queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sir</td>
<td>madam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patron</td>
<td>matron</td>
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<tr>
<td>bachelor</td>
<td>spinster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brave</td>
<td>squaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tailor</td>
<td>seamstress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chef</td>
<td>cook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word “master” and the word “mistress” are similar to each other in meaning, and in some discourse they have been used alike (as in the Christmas carol that goes “God bless the master of this house likewise the mistress too”). “Master” and “mistress” each refer to a person in a high position, or a position of authority. “Master” and “mistress” also are invoked in secondary meanings, and these are more gender-unequal than the primary ones. A “master” is an expert in some craft such as glassblowing or shoe-making. An original of a document can be called a “master copy.” The first postgraduate degree is called a “master’s degree.” What secondary meanings emerge for “mistress”? Illicit girlfriend, or adulterer.

We arrive here at a coincidence: To make women look bad is often to make them unattractively sexual. “Sir” and “madam” are both terms of respect, but a “madam” could also be the person in charge of a bawdy house. “King” and “queen” are both titles for royalty, but “queen” has a secondary meaning of a gay man.

Word pair secondary meanings that are not explicitly sexual favor men in other ways. “Bachelor” and “spinster” both mean single adult, but
"spinster" connotes a woman who chooses this lifestyle from a reduced set of options. A "bachelor" holds a job, cultivates refined tastes, and is single by choice.

"Tailor" and "seamstress" are parallel occupational labels that evoke different statuses: A "tailor" owns a store, while a "seamstress" takes sewing jobs home. Similarly, a "chef" holds a high position in a restaurant, while a "cook" stirs stews for modest wages. The secondary meanings of these feminine words make women look bad.

Sexual Terms

Studies of dictionaries indicate that there are many more words available for describing female sexuality than male sexuality—perhaps by a ratio of ten to one. Furthermore, more of the female descriptors evoke negative connotations. Julia Stanley writes of such terms in print fiction and nonfiction:

My analysis of 220 such terms for women reveals that the only way a woman can define her sexuality with names provided by our culture is demeaning, shameful, and/or oppressively non-existent.

... Terms like screw, rip off, nail, shove it to her, and get into someone clearly define the role of the woman as a passive object on whom the male acts out violent, sadistic fantasies.

Derogatory sexual terms for women include: ass, bimbo, bitch, concubine, courtesan, cunt, floozy, hag, harlot, hooker, hussy, lay, loose woman, minx, mistress, moll, rookie, nympho, paramour, piece, pig, prostitute, slattern, slut, tail, tart, tramp, trick trollop, wanton, whore. Compare the more positive valence of the 20 or so terms for men, including: animal, ass man, Casanova, cocktongue, dirty old man, Don Juan, gigolo, letch, male whore, stud, Svengali, whoremonger.

Test Stanley's claims with this thought exercise. List all the sexual terms you can think of in two minutes. Do it now. Next, re-read your list and classify each term as masculine or feminine. Finally, place a plus or minus sign next to each word, depending on whether the connotations of the word are primarily positive or negative. Most people who complete this exercise list more terms describing women than men, and rate negatively more of the sexual terms describing women. Here is another list of derogatory epithets used to describe women.
Bat, dog, chick, mutton, tart. Queen, madam, lady of pleasure, MISTRESS. Belle-de-nuit, woman of the streets, fruitwoman, fallen woman. Cow, vixen, bitch. Call girl, joy girl, working girl. Lady and whore are both bred to please. The old Woman image-repertoire says She is a Womb, a mere baby's pouch, or "nothing but sexuality."³

This postmodern rant calls attention to some ways that words make women look bad. These words work even in cases in which ambiguity veils the reference to women. Consider this popular song, which is addressed to either a girlfriend or a motor vehicle.

[2] Song: "Dirty World"⁴
He loves your sexy body.
He loves your dirty mind. . .
You don't need no wax job.
You're smooth enough for me.
If you need your oil changed
I'll do it for you free . . .

The title of this song, "Dirty World," ambiguously refers to pornographic imagination and to engine grease under fingernails. Both a woman and a vehicle could have a "sexy body" as well as a "dirty mind" (grimy engine). This song specifies no addressee, but the singer is male, and most people hear it as a man speaking to and about his girlfriend. Both the large number of dirty words about women in our language and our willingness to hear sexual innuendoes about women promote such interpretation.

Wendy: I can't believe she messed around with him even though she knew he had a boyfriend. What a slut!
Wendy: No kidding.

This sexualized vocabulary is not only useful in referring to matters of sexuality.
Tina:     Alison!
Alison:   Bitch- bitch you’re wearing my shirt.

[5] Field note
Brenda:  This morning some lady at the airport called me a *@#* cunt, cause she thought I was cutting in line.

Even in everyday occasions, sex-related insults of women are commonplace. One genre of sexual talk, related to ogling, and to what sex offenders call “dissector,” is talk about the sexually arousing portions of female bodies:

[6] UTCL A41
Don:     My friend showed this picture (0.6) where the perfect woman was titties and a::ss and [pussy hah hah hah
Ned:     [huh huh Aw ma::n, hah hah
Don:     Titties and a::ss and pussy
Ned:     Where’s the rest of the body
        (0.4)
Don:     It was- it was cut off
Ned:     hah hah
Don:     She don’t need- you know, you think about it that’s the perfect woman

This instance makes explicit reference to the parts of women that form specialized objects of males’ ogles, specified by familiar—but derogatory labels (“titties,” “ass,” “pussy”; not “breasts,” etc.). These parts are described as having been “cut off,” a term denoting either photo cropping or amputation. These speakers reduce the notion of woman to stereotypically desirable parts dismembered from the rest of her body. Ned and Don speak of such a reduction as perfecting a woman.

Women are so often photographed or displayed as amputated body parts in advertising that we may lose our capacity to be shocked by such representations. These practices may also be combined with other forms of social bigotry. African American feminist bell hooks tells this tale:
Friday night in a small midwestern town—I go with a group of artists and professors to a late night dessert place. As we walk past a group of white men standing in the entry way to the place, we overhear them talking about us, saying that my companions, who are all white, must be liberals from the college, not regular "townies," to be hanging out with a "nigger." Everyone in my group acts as though they did not hear a word of this conversation... As we enter the dessert place they all burst into laughter and point to a row of gigantic chocolate breasts complete with nipples—huge edible tits. They think this is a delicious idea—seeing no connection between this racialized image and the racism expressed in the entry way.5

As there may be harm to pornography, there may be harm in semipornographic parodies like chocolate breasts. There surely is harm in the uncritical acceptance of such representations—even among individuals who never could be charged with sex offenses. The derogation of a chocolate breast seems gratuitous, even coincidental. No woman is sexually harassed or threatened by this dessert treat (though one woman feels sexually and racially intimidated). Alas, is it a harmless coincidence that chocolate, a favorite dessert substance, shares a place in the color spectrum with African human skin tones? Would a white chocolate breast have been more, or less, offensive? (A thought experiment: List the secondary meanings for the colors white, black, yellow, red, and brown in any English dictionary, and rate them as you rated sexual terms for men and women.)

The sexual derogation of women knows few boundaries. In contrast, the sexual derogation of men is linguistically marked:

[7] Field note
A: You stayed with him?
B: Yeah (pause) We didn’t really do anything, why?
A: I wouldn’t let him touch me- he’s such a male slut.

A male slut, like a lady pilot, needs gender specification to occupy this atypical role. There is no slutlike term specifically for men.
Jokes about Men and Women

Many jokes target a person who is a member of a some out-group: an ethnic minority, an aggie (from an agricultural college), or a woman. Sometimes the same jokes appear about more than one of these categories. For example: Two Aggies are checking out a car's signal lights. "Go to the back of the car," says one Aggie, "and tell me if the signal light is working." The other Aggie says, "Yes it's working, no it's not, yes it's working, no it's not." Experimental comparison showed that when this joke was about two Aggies it was rated a little bit funny. With two black men it was perceived as offensive. This same joke about two women was rated as hilarious.

If speakers build a face of the alien and frightening other, this includes reference to deviant sexuality. Consider this joke I heard in more than one city during the brief 1991 war between the United States and Iraq.

[8] Field note
Q: Why do they call the camel the ship of the desert?
A: Because it's full of Iraqi seamen.

Dig into an ideological joke by examining its ambiguous term(s); here the term is seamen/semen, or sailors/semenal fluid. The implication is that members of the Iraqi culture—perhaps especially military men—practice bestiality. Someone who wears the face of the enemy in wartime is specifically eligible for slurring.

In wartime or peacetime (piece-time?) sexual slurs are readily applicable to women, especially stereotypically sexualized subcategories of women, such as blondes or cheerleaders:

[9] Field note
Scene: a restaurant kitchen, 2 males and 2 females present
Mick: Hey guys I got a joke.
Stu: What is it?
Mick: How are the Bermuda Triangle and cheerleaders alike?
Ann: Oh this sounds like a real winner! How Mick?
Mick: Well they both swallow seamen (semen) Ha ha ha
Stu: So true Mickey! That was a good one
Ann: That was stupid and sexist and ya’ll just wish you had been with a cheerleader.

The same pun (seamen/semen) employed to create a killable enemy in wartime is used against women as standard targets of aggression. Note that this joke does not even need to specify that the unmarked form of cheerleader is female.

[A] good deal of what we find funny in “tendentious jokes” comes from insufficient repression of our fears, that the guffaw is, in no small measure, an act of aggression prompted by those fears. In other words what scares us, we seek to make ridiculous.7

It is easier to tell sexual stories about women than it is about men. The language and culture are set up in ways that promote such tellings. A woman or an enemy may be slurred with bad sexuality.

**Insulting Women and Their Accomplishments**

In talking about human accomplishments, for example, a promotion or a prize, we may attribute the success to internal factors (skill, hard work) or to external factors (luck). Psychologist Kay Deaux found that both men and women are likely to attribute a man’s success to skill or determination, but to attribute a woman’s success to luck.8 This shows up in talk:

[10] Field note

During a dart tournament last Tuesday night, a woman is playing against my boyfriend Herbert. He goes up to the board, aims, and misses all 3 shots. He turns to me, frowns, and mutters a couple of curse words indicating his frustration. His opponent’s turn is next and she hits 2 triple 20s and another 20. Herbert turns to me again, swears, and says “Damn, she’s getting all the shots. Talk about lucky!” It’s his turn again, aims, and this time he hits a triple 20 and 2 double 20s. He turns to me, smiles, and says, “Now that’s what you call skill” . . . And his opponent shouts out, “Good darts, Herbert. Good darts!”
Both Herbert male and his female opponent praise his successful shots. Nobody praises the female's skills after her successful turn. Deaux emphasizes that both men and women attribute more skill to men's success and more luck to women's.

Field note
Brian: How'd you do on the history test?
Kate: I got an A.
Brian: You got an A? How the hell could you get an A—
The test was hard as #@#!
Kate: Well, I guess I was just lucky.

Here the male indicates surprise at the woman's success, and the woman responds with two mitigating particles ("Well," "I guess") and then characterizes her own success as "just lucky." This perception can carry over from test scores to career prospects.

Field note
Sarah: I'm done in August.
Roy: What are you gonna do?
Sarah: Well, I got a marketing job with General Motors.
Roy: How did you get that? (Looks shocked)
Sarah: I just interviewed with them.
Roy: Did you know anyone there?

Roy seems surprised at Sarah's job-hunting success. Sarah answers in an offhand way that downplays her achievement: "I just interviewed," indicates that Sarah did only the minimum required for an interviewee. She did not do any special research, for instance. Roy addresses the luck issue when he asks whether Sarah might "know anyone there." Roy suggests that Sarah got the job by some stroke of luck, rather than through hard work, qualifications for the job, or a successfully conducted interview.

In each of these instances, a woman's success is attributed to luck, but a man's successes are attributed to skill. What are the social costs of downplaying the accomplishments of half of humanity?
We need not wait for accomplishments to insult women. The word "woman" itself may be used as an insult. What happens to Karen when she complains to Dave that he nearly caused a serious accident?

[13] Field note
Karen: Dave, you almost hit me yesterday. You came barreling down the parking garage doing fifty.
Dave: More like seventy.
Karen: Oh, great! (sarcastic) See- you are a bad driver!
Dave: Bullshit!
Karen: Bullshit!
Dave: Bitch! ➤
Karen: Idiot!
Dave: Woman! ➤

Karen and Dave exchange a series of hostile name-callings. Dave assaults Karen with the gendered epithet, "Bitch." When Karen answers with the gender-neutral "Idiot" Dave escalates his insult by calling Karen "Woman!" This sort of insult gets circulated on bulletin boards in forms like "How to tell a businessman from a businesswoman:"

- A businessman is aggressive; a businesswoman is pushy
- He is careful about details; she is picky
- He is discreet; she is secretive

Such comparisons describe a woman's accomplishments in a negative light, while a man's accomplishments rate a complimentary vocabulary. Somewhat similarly, a game that a woman is good at might be a game worth insulting on those grounds, as in this instance from Star Trek. Two men and two women are playing poker. One of the women deals, naming a game with many wild cards.

[14] TV: Star Trek, Next Generation
Whorf: That is a woman's game.
(pause)
Whorf insults the dealer's choice of game as "a woman's game" because the game includes wild cards. Whorf suggests that with many wild cards a player cannot calculate precise odds, and therefore winning depends on luck instead of skill.

"Woman" is especially insulting when used to accuse males of weakness. During the 1997 football season, Patriot coach Bill Parcells was asked about receiver Terry Glenn's recovery from an injury:


Glenn injured his hamstring and missed the entire exhibition season with what Parcells insisted was a mild strain. Asked about Glenn one day at training camp, Parcells said, "She's making progress."¹⁰

Parcells uses the pronoun "she" to tar Glenn with womanly weakness in recovery from an injury. Calling a man a woman has been insulting in many cultures. Here is an example from eighteenth-century Native Americans, as told by a nineteenth-century U.S. historian, Francis Parkman:

The Lenape were then in a state of degrading vassalage to the Five Nations, who, that they might drain to the dregs the cup of humiliation, had forced them to assume the name of Women, and forego the use of arms.

"In Indian eyes," Parkman continues, "the name of women . . . is the last confession of abject abasement."¹¹ That is, calling a warrior a woman is the worst insult possible. Accepting the label of woman is paired with being barred from using weapons. Woman is synonymous with weakness. The situation described occurred in the 1760s. Neither the Iroquois nor Parkman distinguish between insulting the tribe and insulting its (male) warriors.
We seem to practice a similar insult system in America today.

[16] Field note (at a party)

Dick: Hey, where's George?
Tim: He ain't here yet. He had to pick up Fred, which will take a while because he is probably still primping.
Dick: Yeah, Fred is such a woman. He takes forever to get ready to go anywhere. Did you hear what he did to Rob?
Tim: What?
Dick: He bitch-slapped him. Rob was throwing pillows on him and pissed him off. Fred walked up and slapped him across the face. Can you believe it?
Tim: Man, Fred must have been PMSing that day.

A man, it seems can be tagged as a woman for paying excessive attention to his appearance, and for practicing a feminine mode of hitting. The conclusion: Fred is tarred with the womanly insult of being at a characterological low point in the menstrual cycle.

These instances should be evaluated with the specifically sexual epithets discussed previously. Together, these instances indicate a range of ways to insult women, and to insult men by tagging them as women.

Associated with the actual term "woman" as an insult are the terms available in English for insulting women during what could be routine references to persons or practices.

[17] Field note

Woman: Next proposal up for review is Chicks in Communication
Me: Actually it's Women in Communication
Woman: Oh, sorry I guess you're into that women's lib stuff.

The woman chairing the meeting makes a joke about the name of another organization. Another woman corrects this usage, and draws a counterinsult.

[18] Field note

Sister: (to brother) Ed, I've got to be somewhere in 15 minutes, could you help Mom with the dishes
Dad: No that’s squaw work!
Brother: (giggles)
Mom: Hush, Tom.

This fieldworker claimed her dad was joking, but it seems unlikely that Ed helped with the dishes. Mom’s response shows offense at the word “squaw,” which demeans both women and Native Americans as it takes a conservative position on the sex-based distribution of domestic work.

The last examples feature recipients’ disapproving reactions to insult terms. Yet such special notice is more the exception than the rule. Here, for example is the start of a story told by two women to a third—about a fourth woman, who is not present:

[19] CGH
Marie: I thought that thing about the CHICK (.) stun that guy where she’s did, went and got arrested.
Rikki: I know, she’s getting charged=
Marie: Did I tell you that? (.) This- GIRL we met at um (0.6) where were we, Toulouse? (.) She’s FROM NEW YORK, she’s this BLACK GIRL . . . (CAPS added for analysis)

Here, at the outset of a story about a young woman having an altercation in a nightclub, the protagonist of the story is described by a flurry of terms: “chick,” “girl,” “from New York,” and “black girl.” Three of these terms are arguably derogatory as descriptions of a college-aged woman. However, nobody in the speech event takes notice of these descriptions in a way that allows us to assess their impact.

To summarize: There are a number of English words that characterize women negatively, compared to men. Many of these target female sexuality. Women’s accomplishments also are devalued, and the word “woman” by itself can be an insult.

Words with Gendered Shadings
So far we have considered usages that specifically derogate women. Yet many commonly used words seem to lean toward the masculine or toward the feminine, carrying comparative derogations even in lightly gendered settings. For
instance, the words in the Bem Sex Role Inventory (chapter 2) were developed to describe typical masculine and feminine attributes:

[20] Bem Sex Role Inventory words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>self-reliant, self-sufficient</td>
<td>sympathetic, compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defends own beliefs</td>
<td>shy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>independent, individualistic</td>
<td>affectionate, loyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assertive, aggressive</td>
<td>soft-spoken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forceful, dominant</td>
<td>tender, gentle, loves children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has strong personality</td>
<td>sensitive to the needs of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acts as a leader</td>
<td>eager to soothe hurt feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>willing to take risks</td>
<td>does not use harsh language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competitive, athletic</td>
<td>yielding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analytical</td>
<td>cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambitious</td>
<td>gullible, childlike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>willing to take a stand</td>
<td>flatterable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makes decisions easily</td>
<td>understanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Masculine words emphasize power, athletic prowess, and military might. Feminine words add up to supporting others with loyalty and understanding.

A lexical study from a similar premise began with lists of the thousand most commonly used words in the English language. Subjects rated these words as masculine words, feminine words, or neither/both. Here are some common English words rated most masculine and most feminine. Guess which list is which:

[21] Borden

art, beautiful, body, born, care, child, face, faith, family, feel, gave, hair, heart, home, hope, hospital, house, kind, little, love, married, morning, natural, peace, period, personal, picture, piece, pretty, red, secretary, south, social, special, summer, wish, within, young

action, analysis, army, building, chief, company, control, data, defense, direct, doctor, economic, fact, farm, firm, force, god, government, gun,
Words like "military," "industrial," "authority," and "president" are rated as masculine. Words having to do with family, nurturing, limited size, and bodies are feminine. Common words in our language make available differential resources shaded toward the masculine or toward the feminine. Much that we say is made up of partly gendered words implying a bifurcated perceptual field, like a TV screen divided into a pink-shaded half and a blue-shaded half. Much that we say shades into masculinizing and feminizing.

These lists of words are not exactly something that we do. The way cultures operate, you do not have to organize things into masculine things and feminine things. As inheriting a million dollars makes one rich without personal action, the resources of our language offer a speaker an implicitly gendered world before one even begins to speak. Any utterance may include gendering talk, and many of our most common words carry gendered shadings.

Another series of studies engaged participants to list words that characterize a normal human adult. Do this—take two minutes right now to make such a list of attributes using the guide: A normal human is: . . . Next, take two minutes to list words that describe a healthy human adult female. Finally, list words that describe a healthy human adult male. Do it now.

The researchers found that attributes for normal human adults turn out to be the same as those for males.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NORMAL MALE/ADULT</th>
<th>NORMAL FEMALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>independent</td>
<td>dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direct</td>
<td>sneaky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>objective</td>
<td>emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dominant</td>
<td>submissive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logical</td>
<td>religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adventurous</td>
<td>need for security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knows the way of the world</td>
<td>enjoys art and literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aggressive</td>
<td>talkative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This state of affairs puts a female in a bind. She may set goals for herself as a normal female or as a normal competent adult, but it seems difficult to do both of these things within the same life. A male does not face that problem: To become a normal adult and a normal male is to live up to one set of self-conceptions.

This discussion has not emphasized how mass media stories, and especially advertising, distort masculine and feminine role portrayals. However, consider the beer commercials of 1996–97 in which three men watch women go by on the beach, with one of the women showing pleasure at being stared at. Then the men use their Miller can as a video rewind button to repeat view the women’s passing. This ad glamorizes male ogling and female pleasure at being the object of gaze. Should females be happy that men gaze in this way? The balance of this chapter describes talk about women in terms of physical attractiveness. Such talk, like male street remarks, seems complimentary and derogatory at the same time.

THE BEAUTY MYTH

Considering the representation of women in art, critic John Berger argues that men act or look and women appear. This is a way that we communicate differently about women than about men. A song lyric familiar to syndicated sitcom watchers describes some females as “lovely” persons whose hair is specifically praised. The man (whose surname is specified) is described only as “busy.”

[23] Song: Brady Bunch
Here’s a story of a lovely lady
who was bringing up three very lovely girls
All of them had hair of gold, like their mother,
the youngest one in curls.
Here’s the story of a man named Brady,
busy with three boys of his own.

The “busy” man acts, the “lovely” women appear. Does the focus on women’s beauty hinder women as social actors? There certainly is recurrent focus on appearance in talk about women, which Naomi Wolf labels the beauty myth:
The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. The embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful.

None of this is true. “Beauty” is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.16

Wolf argues that men set the terms of the beauty myth from their base of political power. The appearance of women is so widely talked about that it dwarfs all other tropes or topics about women.

[24] Field note
Sandra: You and my roommate seem to be going through the same situation right now. I should introduce you.
Mel: Is she cute?

Sandra suggests introducing Mel to her roommate because these two people share common experiences. Mel bypasses this rationale to ask the first obvious question: Is she cute?

In her book on the female teen psyche, therapist Mary Pipher ponders teens’ emphasis on beauty:

Beauty is the defining characteristic for American women. It’s the necessary and often sufficient condition for social success. It is important for women of all ages, but the pressure to be beautiful is most intense in early adolescence. Girls worry about their clothes, makeup, skin and hair. But most of all they worry about their weight. Peers place an enormous value on thinness.17
This emphasis leads to teen eating disorders, among other problems. The emphasis on beauty, even for women held up as beauty icons, has troublesome consequences. A woman can be trivialized by mention of her looks as one who appears and does not act. This seems especially to be the case if a woman shows interest in such appearances:

[25] Beach SDCL: Two Guys, simplified

W: I went out with Melissa last night
T: Tuh hu: [:h?
W: [We went to u:h (0.2) In n Out? (a burger joint)
T: Uh huh
W: And uh she’s all like I’m uncomfortable in my dress. ◄
Lemme go home [and change!  
[(shared laughter)
T: Too much cleavage?
. . . (About 5 seconds deleted)
W: I’m like (.) totally fallin asleep in her room cause she’s taken forever chaaa:ning and she comes back like, How do I look, ◄
I’m like o:h no! Like, let’s not- I(h)et’s not start this off on the wrong foot, you know? So anyways
T: I don’t think she’s that good loo:king do you ◄
W: Hm um
(0.2)
T: She’s got a nice little body [but that’s about it
W: [Mm hm
W: And she’s got a cute little dress

The woman in this story is pictured as interested only in her appearance. If her dress seems inappropriate to an occasion (as a nice dress might be inappropriate to a burger joint) she thinks of changing her dress, not acting to change the meal site. After she changes clothes she asks for feedback on her looks. This part of the story prompts the recipient of the story to make dismissive comments on the woman’s looks.

Evaluating women in terms of appearance may affect perceptions of their abilities.
[26] Field note (office)

Ed: The new group of trainees Stan hired has some real potential.
Ron: Mark and Joe are really catching on and so are those three women.
Ed: Mandy is such a hard worker, but do you think she is too much of a doll to hold her own?
Ron: Maybe she will prove us wrong

In this office setting two managers discuss a new group of trainees. Two men are named in this praise, the three women are faintly praised but not named. Ed then praises one woman, Mandy, for being a hard worker, but follows this praise by asking whether she is “too much of a doll to hold her own.” One problem with evaluating women in terms of beauty is that this is negatively related to lack of professional performance expectations.

[27] Field note (office)

Tom: Did you hear? The new systems analyst will be starting on Friday.
Matt: No, who is he?
Tom: Actually he is a she and her name is Helen. And wait until you see her. She is a babe.
Matt: Hmmm, I’ll be looking forward to checking her out

Hearing a technical job title (systems analyst), Matt guesses that the new employee is a male, a presumption discussed in chapter 6. It turns out that the new employee is a woman. Having stated her sex and her first name, Tom says, “Wait until you see her. She is a babe.” Being a babe may become a professional liability for Helen. Matt responds that he will “be looking forward to checking her out.” Will Matt examine Helen’s appearance more closely than her professional skills? Might Matt consider Helen as date potential, or even as a harassment target? Helen’s appearance (though Tom praises it) may handicap her professionally. A few weeks later these men (having appreciated Helen as a gaze object) might wonder whether she could be too much of a doll to hold her own. Checking her out as a babe may become more salient than checking her out as a systems analyst.
Two hundred years ago, Mary Wollstonecraft described a connection between emphasis on a woman’s looks and dismissal of her useful actions.

[Men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilised women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition.]

Women’s powerlessness is linked to social pressures to appear in public as objects of adored beauty.

For beauty is closely intertwined with power; the myth that married the Sleeping Beauty to Prince Charming solidifies the image. . . . A woman’s beauty is of no intrinsic use to herself, but she trades her beauty for his wealth, influence, charms, strength. But it is really not a comfortable trade.

Beauty provides only a slippery slope to limited power through a powerful man, and is vulnerable to fashion, aging, or the man’s whim. At the same time, the emphasis on beauty takes over many discourses about women. A pop song, reborn as a movie theme, intones:

Song: “Pretty Woman”
Pretty woman walking down the street
Pretty woman passing by
Pretty woman stop a while and stay with me.

This text is so familiar we scarcely hear that the woman has just one characteristic, she is pretty. A bystander admires her in a sung street remark. The singer states a desire to start a relationship (respectful line?) on the basis of the woman’s appearance. In the movie named after this song, the woman works as a prostitute, indicating:
• that women are objects for the male's ogling gaze, and
• that there are professional disadvantages to being evaluated in terms of appearance alone.

A scene from the film *Carnal Knowledge* opens to show a young woman dressed in white, skating to music in a public park. Audience members are invited to stare at the skater. Then slowly the camera pulls back to reveal two male friends staring at her, and saying:

[29] Film: *Carnal Knowledge*²¹

J: Do you want her?
A: I wouldn't kick her outta bed.
J: Will you look at the *pair* on her.
A: Do look at that schmuck trying to keep up with her.
J: They're always with guys like that.
A: That guy must be sixty if he's a day.
J: Maybe he'll have a heart attack.
You could save his life, get a number and #@*# her.

The male protagonists watch the skater and talk about her in terms mixing beauty and sexual availability. These men's talk supports and sharpens their looking by building sexual fantasies.

The masculine gaze plays a major role in the visual arts. Western artists have painted and sculpted female nudes for centuries. Art seems to both celebrate and promote the gazing (and talking) that these two movie protagonists practice. In any art museum, lookers both female and male find undressed representations of women in substantial numbers; nude males also occur, but less frequently and with less celebration. The male nude, like the male slut, is a marked and exceptional form.

To bring each of these art nudes into being, an artist (usually male) has ordinarily obtained the services of an actual nude woman to pose for his attentive staring during the composition. This practice is vivid in the journals of French sculptor Benvenuto Cellini. Here is Cellini's own account of the creation of his "Nymph of Fontainebleu."
I made her pose in the nude. . . And then I had my revenge by using her sexually, mocking her and her husband. . . . What she said and did nearly drove me out of my mind, and giving into my rage, I seized her by the hair and dragged her up and down the room, beating and kicking her until I was exhausted. . . . Then I began to copy her, and in between times we enjoyed sexual pleasures. . . .

[However] she provoked me so much that I had to give her the same beating, and this went on for several days, always in the same pattern, with little variation. Meanwhile I, who had won myself great honor and finished my figure, gave the orders to cast it in bronze.22

Cellini’s model was trapped by circumstances and bound to him through a triple power relation. As a servant within his household she served his sexual needs and the requirements of his art. The male as patron, voyeur, and artist unite in the history of art nudes.23

The film Camille Claudel portrays a talented sculptor who becomes a sexually exploited model for Rodin. Early in the film, Mlle. Claudel, working as a novice in the balcony of Rodin’s studio, watches as the master sculptor twists a female on a pedestal into uncomfortable positions, then sexually harasses her. Claudel assumes the voyeur position in a scene she will later enter as a participant.

Feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon centers her anti-pornography scholarship around reports of brutal violence and even murder perpetrated upon females who appear in pornographic films. Such artistic activity is supported by consumers who derive pleasure by gazing lustfully in the guise of art.24

In horror and slasher films the object of our gaze (especially if she is sexually hungry) becomes a target for sexual violence. In Dressed to Kill a woman who is sexually bored with her husband unsuccessfully propositions her psychotherapist. Then she goes to an art museum and (surrounded by art nudes) lusts after a mysterious handsome man. She joins him in a cab for a steamy sex scene featuring the driver adjusting his mirror for a clearer look. Later that night, this woman is brutally murdered. The payoff for being the object of the male gaze is especially harsh if the female dares to perform her own lustful gaze.25

The art spectator (or film viewer) mirrors everyday ogling practices, as shown in the skating scene from Carnal Knowledge:
Film: *Carnal Knowledge*

J: Not bad, that one. (the skater)

A: Listen, you must be getting more than your share.

J: I'd get married in a minute if I could find the right girl.

A: Bullshit artist, you and your actress friends.

J: Are you kidding Doctor, you're the one who's got the deal. I can—what can I say. Take your clothes off baby I want to check your capital gains?

(3)

A: I just look.

J: huh huh Sure you do.

A: I really do. Susan's plenty enough woman for one man.

(2)

A: Hey look at that.

(3)

J: That's Sally Joyce.

(1)

A: Didn't I see her on Ed Sullivan?

The tax accountant praises the skater's beauty. The doctor replies that the accountant must get more than his share of sexual opportunity. The tax accountant envies the doctor for working with disrobed women. The doctor fingers his wedding ring and says: "I just look." Then immediately, he encourages his friend to look at a woman passing by pushing a stroller, finding in this passerby a sexual object of interest of the same sort as the skater. These ogle-and-talk episodes show these men regarding two very different women with a similar social ogle.

The word "just" in the utterance "I just look" pretends to distinguish the speaker-ogler from men who yell catcalls, or follow women to their cars, or do something more menacing. "I just look" claims that action to be something harmless. I remember watching an Ed Sullivan Show in the 1950s on which appeared a Catholic spiritual leader. His appearance came right after that of a young woman, whom he passed as he made his entrance. The churchman turned his head to ogle, and the audience cracked up. Ed Sullivan said "I thought you took a vow about this sort of thing," and the priest
responded, "Just because I'm on a perpetual diet doesn't mean I can't examine the menu." That is an utterance like "I just look."

Men defend this right to ogle if it is challenged. Recently my tennis partner and I were visiting on the court after a set when he said, "Well look at that!" I followed the line of his gaze to discover a woman stretching with one leg up on a car hood. To record my disapproval I remained silent. He said, "When I stop looking you'll know I'm dead." A masculine cliché: "They'll take away my gun when they pry my cold, dead fingers off the trigger," may connect ogling and love of guns. So does a rhyme my brother learned at army boot camp: "This is my weapon, this is my gun; this one's for fighting, this one's for fun."

The discourse that defends looking bypasses the affiliation of ogling with violent acts and pornographic representations (chapter 4). Yet not all gazing at female beauty is pornographic, or even male. Women's talk about themselves and each other is frequently laden with beauty ideology.

[31] CGH

Marie: Shannon Morris looks gorgeous have you seen her
Alice: Tell me.
Marie: She looks beautiful (0.4) beautiful like, Shannon's always been pretty like her face then she lost all of her weight so she was skinny and she still had a pretty face and she was pretty. She's like stunning now
Alice: Tell me why.

(0.4)
Marie: Her hair's like red, but with a lot of blonde in it?
Rikki: And it's just so
Marie: [It's like down to here.
Rikki: And it's curly.
Marie: All curly, one length, she's thin?
Alice: Thin.

(0.4)
Marie: She's not skinny.
Rikki: Right. She's thin [she's this thick

Marie: [She's like tall. She's real tall looking, and she's like you look at her. She's the type of girl that would walk down the street and you'd look like three times. Cause she's very attractive.

(0.6)
Like stunning [I was in shock

Rikki: [s'lookin so good.

The word "stunning" centers this discussion of a local incarnation of the beauty myth. This woman is so beautiful that passersby look at her three times. The person who looks at Shannon is stunned, shocked.

These women show a detailed vocabulary for discussing Shannon as a paragon of beauty: "thin" is distinguished from "skinny"; hair length is discussed in detail, as is weight loss, so that this stunning beauty is seen to have been partly achieved. The discussion of the beautiful acquaintance then is applied to the art of enhancing one's own personal appearance. Immediately after the preceding fragment, Alice begins a lengthy and self-effacing assessment of her own assets in light of the ideal:

[32] CGH, continued

Marie: Like stunning [I was in shock

Rikki: [s'looking so good.

Alice: There's really nothing stunning about me and I've been tryin to figure something stunning jhhh like I know that I'm okay, and everything but I'm saying jhhh like there's certain people that you look at, and there's something that stands out with them? I don't think there's anything wrong with me but I don't think I have one thing that stands out, because the only that could is maybe my cheekbones? 

(1)

But who notices cheekbones.

(1)

You know?

Marie: I do.
Alice: And so my sister told me; that I should stop wearing all-all my makeup and like do everything really lightly, and then wear bright lipstick.

(1)
That's what I been trying to do but still doesn't make me stunning

Marie: Well some people aren't stunning some people you're- are pretty.

Alice: I'm just not stunning.

Alice repeatedly pursues praise for her efforts to achieve the beauty status of "stunning." She notes that she is following her sister's makeup advice in order to look her best. Yet she still cannot achieve stunning looks. Alice puts both herself and her friends into a vulnerable position by transparently fishing for appearance compliments.

It is like that scene in Disney's Snow White, in which the wicked queen asks her magic mirror who is the fairest. Having heard about stunning Shannon, Alice asks her pals to reflect on her attempts to measure up to the beauty myth. Marie admits that Alice is not stunning, but grants her a consolation prize: "you're pretty." This assessment does not comfort Alice, who repeats her lament: "I'm just not stunning." The beauty myth produces few contented female contenders.

Marie and Alice go on to remember another occasion when they evaluated each other in terms of the beauty myth.

[33] CGH, continued

Marie: One time when Alice and I were earlier talking about what was the prettiest and ugliest about us, and when- I was like telling her (0.6) the- the best feature you have's like your cheekbones and all this stuff and I go what about me she goes, your best features are your eyebrows.

Alice: That is not [what I said]

Marie: [It is too:

Marie refers to an earlier occasion in which She and Alice had exchanged detailed assessments of appearance features and how to improve them. That
occasion had left Marie feeling wounded, she says, because the best Alice could do was to praise her eyebrows. This talk about the past indicates that these friends have shared an ongoing colloquy that spans clothing, makeup, jewelry, and cosmetic surgery. The practical project of looking good repeatedly is refocused in talk about others, as well as in interaction games to construct inventories of one's positive and negative appearance features. This candid self-evaluation points toward the unachievable goal of measuring up to the beauty myth. In pursuing this preoccupation these cosmetic esthetes spare no source of enhancement.

The practices and scenes of cosmetic criticism seem ubiquitous:

[34] Field note

Jan: Wow! She's really going for the natural look
Zoe: Yeah, she always dresses like that, T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, some type of athletic shorts, hair in a ponytail, no makeup.
Jan: She's got a really good body.
Zoe: Yeah, she's always working out and doing some kind of exercise.

The “natural look” is not left unspecified: These onlooking critics make a list of the items of clothing needed to constitute this look. Critics also discuss these items in their own appearance, not just those of passersby. These discussions often take the form of practical advice:

[35] Field note

Rhonda: What do you think about this one?
Wendy: It looks good, but are you sure you want to wear a bikini to go waterskiing in? What if it comes off when you fall?
Rhonda: Well, hopefully I won't fall. And besides, I haven't worked my butt off at the gym just to wear a one-piece. Matt is going to be there too.
Wendy: Oh, so that's why you're so nervous.
Rhonda: I'm not nervous. I just want to look good and then we'll see what happens.
Rhonda: Do you think he'll like my navel ring, or will he think it's, uh, trashy?

Wendy: I don't know, I don't know him that well.

Rhonda: Oh god, maybe I should get a one-piece?

The indecisive quality of this scene grows from the women taking a number of factors into consideration. A kind of look, the practicality for an activity like waterskiing, the impact on a potentially interesting male of both a more revealing swimsuit and a navel ring. The two women do not resolve this problem; rather they turn over its possibilities and let their expertise combine in dialog.

This sort of conversation is often portrayed as a kind of women's talk, and something that troubles male-female intimacy.

[36] Field note

Cathy: I've gained so much weight lately
Jake: Really? I haven't noticed.
Cathy: Yeah, look, I got all this flappy stuff on my thighs and my stomach.
Jake: Oh, don't worry about it
(pause)
Besides I like the flappy stuff. It makes you so nice and soft.

Cathy: You think I'm fat?
Jake: No, I don't think you're fat.
Cathy: You just said it.
Jake: No I didn't
Cathy: Yes, you did. You said I have flappy stuff.
Jake: No, you said-
Cathy: You make me feel so ugly when you say that.
Jake: You were the one who said it.
Cathy: But you agreed.

Cathy raises a beauty topic (in this case fat) in a self-doubting way. Jake gets into interactional trouble as he reacts to an apparent request for reassurance. As he denies the problem his credibility is challenged. As he tries to solve the
problem by being reassuring, he stands accused of having called Cathy fat. Such examples support gendered-difference mythology. What is being celebrated in this story? Perhaps that women may talk of such matters in a dialogic way—preserving indecision and face while practicing terminology and criteria. Yet a male lover's comments are received with suspicion.

In most of the examples above, women speak only of their near misses in beauty, but there is also an ugly myth.

[37] Field note

Marge: Did you see her?
Jenny: Yeah, what the hell did she do to her hair. It used to be your color, right?
Marge: Yeah, it looked so much better. The blonde looks like crap.
Jenny: (laughs) Yeah.
Marge: And she thinks she is such hot shit and she's just drop dead gorgeous. What a dumb bitch.
Jenny: (laughs) Yeah.

Jenny points out the target for her invective, and Marge volunteers a negative evaluation. The contempt for this observed woman is then turned into a failed pretension, earning the term "bitch." The association of negative appearance with other negative evaluation is exemplified in this phone chat between college men:

[38] Wool: Glenn

Stan: I was uh at my brother's wedding last weekend.
(0.8)
Dave: There's a lot of wool at weddings. Y'know that?
Stan: I know. You wouldn't believe all the coot that was up there.
Dave: Ho hoh khhh
Stan: They make these girls look like dog meat.
(0.8)
Dave: Haw:::hhh

Stan: These girls have no (0.7) These girls look like shit down here compared to girls up there, I'm tellin ya.
Dave: Aw hell yeah

(0.9)

Dave: Well they’re easy to grease down here. Up there ‘er a challenge

These men share an interest in the project of gazing at women (a.k.a. “girls”) in a variety of environments. They compare women using reference terms applicable to wildlife and pet food (“wool,” “coots,” “dog meat”). The environments of women are taken for granted as subject to scrutiny.

This instance shows a mix of sexual derogation of women and orientation to the beauty myth. It is not difficult to show how the beauty myth operates in these conversations. It is a more rigorous challenge to make the connection between an emphasis on female appearance and the powerless state of women in the corporate world and in the public polity. Yet the connection seems as genuine as it is worth describing.

**SHOULD WE CHANGE HOW WE TALK ABOUT WOMEN?**

What have we learned from this discussion (chapters 7 and 8)?

- We talk differently about men than about women. We emphasize men over women, marginalizing women and their achievements, confining descriptions of women to stereotypical women’s places. When we do talk about women, many micro speech features serve to derogate women through sexual insult. We hobble women’s being taken seriously by discussing them in terms of physical appearance and describing their accomplishments as lucky rather than skillful.

- This is not just something men do to women. It is something we all do. It is not primarily that men and women speak differently in these ways, but that we all speak and listen alike. Both men and women listen differently to women than to men; both men and women speak differently about women than about men.

- Many of the ways that we talk about women and men happen out of habit or by accident. We often continue to do such things even after we try to change our habits.
These microindicators of talk about women (emphasis, derogation, and the beauty myth) combine with each other. As illustrated in the "plane Jane" joke, these uses do not appear neatly sorted into the categories raised in the past two chapters. Sex and violence issues, especially the economy of the ogle, add to the mix. We gender conversation in eclectic yet cumulative ways—one orientation sparks a next one. Each of these genderings is in some sense unfair to women and difficult to change.

These discursive practices are unfair to women in ways that may hinder the achievement of gender equity. Maybe men seem to have big egos because they have received praise, permissiveness, and patriarchal powers. Talk about men and about women displays troublesome ideology and creates bits of bad karma, drops in the bucket of inequality within the arrangement between the sexes.

We should collect information about patterns by which we treat men and women unequally or unfairly, and we should consider changing our patterns of writing and speech. Any recent change in usage, yours or someone else's, often sounds awkward to speakers and listeners alike. Any change, like any speech act, is multifaceted and creates unforeseen rhythms, new word associations, the potential for misunderstanding. We do not want to go around remarking obsessively over the ideological bias of each utterance. Yet as we develop and refine our consciousness that what we say represents us, we begin to notice that each utterance may carry undesired ideological freighting.

Any change of habitual ways of communicating is only partially under our control. Twenty years ago, when writing a textbook, I resolved to introduce gender fairness into my use of examples. Throughout the manuscript I carefully alternated examples with male and female protagonists—which did not seem that difficult since most of that text's examples were hypothetical instances. I failed to notice, however, until an editor discovered this imbalance, that thirteen straight female examples had turned on issues of physical appearance. Gleep.

Consider, if you are interested in change, the company you keep. If you try to quit smoking does it make a difference with whom you hang out? Any social partner might pull out a cigarette, and it might smell good. You might see the bulge in a friend's pocket and fall into a nicotine fit. For almost any
kind of practice—name your habit—there is a speech community that sup-
ports that abuse. Who you are with makes a big difference in improving
habits.

Those speakers who favor change in speaking patterns must also con-
sider how to react when others perform potentially harmful usages. One
temptation is to correct the other—yet there are few occasions in which such
correction has a positive impact on the behavior of the corrected person.
Furthermore, correction often leads to polarization, justification, denial, or
other talk about talk. Correct others' speech sparingly. Most corrections are
ineffective and cause problems of their own. Correcting details of others'
writing may be useful, if circumstances make such correction appropriate.
Then, be gentle. There are few activities more sexist than an accusation of
sexism.

If we are concerned about the noises we make in the social world, we
should give continuing consideration to the examples that have been given
here. These examples show routine and familiar ways of speaking unequally
about women and men. It is difficult to find examples of wording that advan-
tage women at the expense of men. As we cast such representations within
our own speech, we remake and sustain inequality between the sexes. We also
sustain the notion that men and women are from different planets when we
talk differently about women than about men.