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Keywords #2

English 4960: Keywords

Dr. Field

Masculinity

When I think of the world before 1964, the United States was a scary and very unfamiliar place particularly for women and people of color. For women and people of color, specifically African-Americans, the United States was a dangerous socially, politically, and economically. African-Americans and women were expected to play their role society had defined for them, and anyone who decided that they did not want to play their role was “dealt with” to keep the status quo. Thankfully, the Civil Rights and the Feminist Movements have challenged and changed the structures put in place to keep women and people of color second class citizens. However, there recently have been movements on social media and in the political sphere that claim that the progress of both movements, particularly the Feminist Movement has gone too far[[1]](#footnote-0). The Men’s Rights Movement (MRM) it is not a campaign for equal rights, but rather a campaign that strives to reaffirm what it means to be a man, or the reclaiming of one’s **masculinity**.

The Oxford English Dictionary(OED) defines **masculinity** as “the state or fact of being **masculine**; the assemblage of qualities regarded as characteristic of men; maleness, manliness,”[[2]](#footnote-1) which tells me absolutely nothing about the traits associated with being a man, so I must go back to the OED to define *masculine.* There are many definitions for the word *masculine*, but the ones that referred to what it meant to be a man defined masculine as “designating an object deemed to be of the male sex on the basis of some quality, such as strength or activity, esp. as contrasted with a corresponding object deemed female,” and “of a personal attribute, an action, etc.: having a character befitting or regarded as appropriate to the male sex; vigorous, powerful. Of a man: manly, virile.”[[3]](#footnote-2) So by these definitions of *masculine* and my own understanding of social construction of gender*,* I can then define **masculinity** as a set of traits and qualities that are associated with someone who was born with male sex organs in contrast with someone who was born with female sex organs.

**Masculinity** depends on the dichotomy that there are traits that men and women possess. So what exactly are the traits that men possess that women do not? Immediately, I think of the Disney movie *Mulan[[4]](#footnote-3)*, which is about a young woman who poses as a young man in order to fight a war in the place of her sick father. Mulan cuts her hair and wears men’s clothing in order look like a man, but the changing of the clothes is on the beginning of her transformation from male to female. Before she reports to basic training, Mulan must change the way she acts so she is not perceived as a woman in men’s clothing, but a man. With help of her talking mini-dragon, Mushu, Mulan is able to fool the ranking army officer and official into believing that she is a man; however, her portrayal of man makes her superiors believe that she is mentally deficient. We quickly realize that Mulan is not the only soldier who does not ascribe to what it means to “be a man,” and it is the entire camp that must learn. In Disney fashion, the soldiers learn how to be a man through a song and montage of the soldiers going through training. The song titled “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” describes what a man should be in the chorus, and a man should “ be swift as a coursing river… with all of the force of a great typhoon...with all of the strength as a raging fire/mysterious as the dark side of the moon.”[[5]](#footnote-4) In order “to be a man”, men have to be: 1) clever/intelligent, 2) confident, 3) physically strong, and 4)control his emotions. The song clearly defines what *masculine* characteristics are, so from our understanding what is *masculine,* we can then define that feminine characteristics or what it means to “be a woman” as 1) not being clever/intelligent, 2)being timid, 3) being physically weak, and 4) having no control of one’s emotions. Thankfully, the film spells out rather clearly that men and women have these traits regardless of sex, and it is society that deems certain traits as *masculine* or feminine.

It seems as if **masculinity** is an expression of one’s power over another person, and if a person, particularly a woman, challenges the power of man over her is a challenge to one’s **masculinity.** **Masculinity** depends on the idea that someone with femininity will not challenge the power over them, and that they will be submissive. The issue I have with **masculinity** is that is a weak understanding of what power is. If **masculinity** was as powerful as it claims to be then there would be no need to define one’s **masculinity** in terms of femininity. Society has created a false dichotomy that has pit men against women. Men’s Rights Activist believe that feminism has gone too far and claim that women want to oppress men similarly to women. Feminism wants create an equal footing in society rather than an exertion of power over the opposite sex. The idea that one sex is greater than another is a *masculine* idea, and feminism wants to leave this idea behind that one sex is greater than the other, but rather regardless of sex people are equal socially, politically, and economically. There should be no reason why women should not be paid the same amount of money for the same job a man has, but in the United States women will make less money than men doing the same work. Men’s Rights Activist would probably claim that woman does not have the same responsibilities a man has which are defined as being able to support one’s family, but reality is both men and women work in order to provide for the family unit. **Masculinity** is an arbitrary idea of power that excludes half of the population, and creates spaces that deny for equal exchange to occur.

1. Paul Elam, “Mission Statement,” *A Voice For Men*, last modified 2014. http://www.avoiceformen.com/policies/mission-statement/ [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. "masculinity, n.". OED Online. December 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114566?redirectedFrom=masculinity+ (accessed February 12, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. "masculine, adj. and n.". OED Online. December 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114561 (accessed February 12, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *Mulan*, Streaming on *Netflix*, directed by [Tony Bancroft](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0051643/?ref_=tt_ov_dr) and Barry Cook (1998 Orlando, FL: Buena Vista Pictures.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Matthew Wilder, “I’ll Make A Man Out of You,” by Harvey Fierstien, Eddie Murphy, Donny Osmond, Lea Salonga, Matthew Wilder, and Jerry Tondo, in *Mulan: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, Walt Disney, 1998, http://itunes.com.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)