Introduction

The Universal Male

Man is the measure of all things.

—Protagoras (c. 485–410 B.C.)

Join me, if you will, in a brief flight of fancy. George Jones, age thirty-four, visits the "psychology and health" section of his local bookstore. There he finds an assortment of books designed to solve his problems with love, sex, work, stress, and children:

- *The X Spot and other new findings about male sexuality* tells him exactly how to have the right kind of multiple orgasm that women have.
- *The Male Manager* shows why his typically male habits of competitiveness and individualism prevent him from advancing in the female-dominated, cooperative corporate world.
- *Cooperation Training* offers practical instructions for overcoming his early competitive socialization as a man, showing him how to get along more smoothly with others.
- *The Superman Syndrome* explains that because men are physically less hardy than women throughout their lives, men find it difficult to combine work and family. They would live as long as women do if they would scale down their efforts to seek power and success.
The Father Knot and The Reproduction of Fathering explore the reasons that George feels so guilty about the way he is raising his children. Women feel comfortable with motherhood, these books argue, because they bear and nurse their offspring. But men for basic anatomical reasons are doomed to feel insecure and guilty in their role as fathers because unconsciously they never quite believe the child is theirs.

Erratic Testosterone Syndrome (ETS)—What it is and how to live with it provides medical and psychological information to help George cope with his hormonal ups and downs. Because men do not have a visible monthly reminder of hormonal changes, they fail to realize that their moodiness and aggressive outbursts are hormonally based. A special concluding chapter helps the wives of men with ETS learn to live with their husbands' unpredictable mood swings.

Lucky George. He will never feel obliged to read books like these, were anyone ever to write them; but of course women feel obliged to read the comparable volumes directed to them. It's a puzzle that they do, actually, because most of these books imply that women aren't doing anything right. Women are irrational and moody because of their hormones. They cry too much. They love too much. They talk too much. They think differently. They are too dependent on worthy men, but if they leave the men to fend for themselves, they are too independent, and if they stay with the men they are codependent. They are too emotional, except when the emotion in question is anger, in which case they aren't emotional enough. They don't have correct orgasms, the correct way, with the correct frequency. They pay too much attention to their children, or not enough, or the wrong kind. They are forever subject to syndromes: the Superwoman Syndrome causes the Stress Syndrome, which is exacerbated by Premenstrual Syndrome, which is followed by a Menopausal Deficiency Syndrome.

Why do women buy so many self-help books every year to improve their sex lives, moods, relationships, and mental health? Simone de Beauvoir gave us one answer in 1949: because women are the second sex, the other sex, the sex to be explained. Men and women are not simply considered different from one another, as we speak of people differing in eye color, movie tastes, or preferences for ice cream. In almost every domain of life, men are considered the normal human being, and women are "ab-normal," deficient because they are different from men. Therefore, women constantly worry about measuring up, doing the right thing, being the right way. It is normal for women to worry about being abnormal, because male behavior, male heroes, male psychology, and even male physiology continue to be the standard of normalcy against which women are measured and found wanting.

Despite women's gains in many fields in the last twenty years, the fundamental belief in the normalcy of men, and the corresponding abnormality of women, has remained virtually untouched. Now even this entrenched way of thinking is being scrutinized and the reverberations are echoing across the land. Everywhere we look, it seems, teachers, courses, theories, and books are being challenged to examine their implicit assumption that man is the measure of all things.

Thus, in politics, we have "important issues" (drugs, economics, war) and then "women's issues" (day care, birth control, peace), as if these matters could or should be divided at the gender line. Congress and the United Nations worry about international violations of "human rights," but these rarely include violations of women's rights such as denial of suffrage, wife-beating, genital mutilation, forced prostitution, or sweatshops that run on underpaid female labor. Somehow, these are "women's issues," not "human rights" issues. We worry, as well we should, about the feminization of poverty, but we do not see its connection to the masculinization of wealth. The phrase "unfit mother" rolls trippingly off judicial tongues, but "unfit father" is nowhere to be heard. We ponder the problem of unwed, "sexually irresponsible" teenage mothers, not the problem of unwed, sexually irresponsible teenage fathers. Boys will be boys, we say, but girls better not be mothers. Indeed, reproductive freedom in general is a "woman's issue," as if men were merely disinterested bystanders on the matter of sexuality and its consequences.

The perception of female otherness occurs in every field, as we are learning from critical observers in science, law, medicine, history, economics, social science, literature, and art. In medicine, students learn anatomy and physiology and, separately, female anat-
om and physiology; the male body is anatomy-itself. In art, we have works of general excellence and, separately, works by women artists, generally regarded as different and lesser; male painters represent art-itself. In literature, a college course on "black female writers of the twentieth century" is considered a specialized seminar; yet when an English instructor at Georgetown University called her course "white male writers," it was news—because the works of white male writers are regarded as literature-itself. In psychoanalysis, Freud took the male as the developmental norm for humanity, regarding female development as a pale and puny deviation from it.

In history, the implicit use of men as the norm pervades much of what schoolchildren learn about American and Western civilization. Was Greece the cradle of democracy? It was no democracy for women and slaves. Was the Renaissance a time of intellectual and artistic rebirth? There was no renaissance for women—"at least," wrote historian Joan Kelly, "not during the Renaissance." Did the Enlightenment expand the "rights of man" in education, politics, and work? Yes, but it narrowed the rights of women, who were denied control of their property and earnings and barred from higher education and professional training. Was the American frontier "conquered" by single scouts, brave men "taming" the wilderness and founding a culture based on self-reliance? This mythic vision excludes the women who struggled to establish homes, survive childbirth, care for families, and contribute with men to the community that was essential to survival.

In economics, supposedly the study of pure market forces and the "Rational Man" (in comparison to the irrational—whom?), the field relies on measures of gross national product as the main gauge of a nation's economic performance, overlooking the value of women's unpaid labor in the home and the invisible work they do that lies outside market economies. For example, as political economist Marilyn Waring has shown, the work of women farmers in underdeveloped nations is not computed in economic formulas that are the basis for agricultural assistance programs. The result is that women farmers lose government aid, with devastating results for food production and the nutritional health of their families. "Economics-itself" does not concern itself with such matters. Students of economics are left with the impression that women's unpaid labor and the systematic underpayment of women's labor in the work force do not matter, or that they are aberrations in an otherwise rational system, or that women are to blame for allowing themselves to become trapped in low-paying or nonpaying jobs.

In philosophy, the centrality in thought and language of the universal male affects the ability to reason about humanity. The philosopher Elizabeth Minnich reminds us of the famous syllogism:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

But, Minnich suggests, try this one:

All men are mortal.
Alice is ———

Alice is—what? We can't say "Alice is a man." So we say she is a woman. Therefore—what? Alice is immortal? Alice, being female, is in a category that is neither masculine nor mortal:

Alice ends up in the peculiar position of being a somewhat mortal, somewhat immortal, creature. Or, we must admit, we cannot thus reason about Alice while thinking of her as a female at all. We can think of Socrates as a man without derailing the syllogism; we cannot think of Alice as a woman. Reason founders; the center holds, with Man in it, but it is an exclusive, not a universal or neutral, center. Alice disappears through the looking glass.¹

Many people, Minnich adds, find it odd, uncomfortable, or threatening to suggest that it is appropriate to expand a field's horizons to include all humankind. "What does it mean for democracy," she asks, "that only some few kinds of humans can be imagined as our representatives? What does it mean for all of us on this shrinking globe?" ¹
My inquiry in this book is motivated by the spirit of Minnich's question: I wish to examine the consequences for us all, male and female, when only some few of us set the standards of normalcy and universality. My goal is to expand our visions of normalcy, not to replace a male-centered view with a female-centered one. But to do so we must first unmask the three most popular disguises of the universal male. Each of these currently popular ways of thinking about men and women has its adherents and detractors, and each leads to different consequences for how we live our lives:

- **Men are normal; women, being "opposite," are deficient.** This us-them, yin-yang, masculine-is-good, feminine-as-bad view of the sexes is the oldest tradition in civilization. It regards men and women as polar opposites, with males as the repository of culture, intellectual, and strength, and females the repository of nature, intuition, and weakness.

- **Men are normal; women are opposite from men, but superior to them.** Proponents of this view emphasize aspects of female experience or female "nature"—such as menstruation, childbirth, compassion, spirituality, cooperation, pacifism, and harmony with the environment—and celebrate them as being morally superior to men's experiences and qualities. In this view, nevertheless, man is still the standard against which woman's behavior is judged, even if the judgments are kinder.

- **Men are normal, and women are or should be like them.** Proponents of this approach, which would seem to be the antidote to the fundamental-difference schools, actually commit an intrinsic error of their own. By ignoring the differences that do exist between men and women—in life experiences, resources, power, and reproductive processes—the basically-akin school assumes that it is safe to generalize from the male standard to all women.

These three errors, in their various incarnations, have done serious harm to women's feelings about themselves, to their relationships, and to their position in society. They are responsible for the guilt-inducing analyses that leave women feeling that once again they lack the right stuff and aren't doing the right thing. They have made sicknesses and syndromes of women's normal bodily processes, and "diseases" of women's normal experiences. They have framed the debate over solutions to social problems, and led reformers down unproductive paths. They have excluded men from the language of love, intimacy, and connection, perpetuating unhappiness and outright warfare in the family, where many men and women remain baffled by the mysterious opposite sex.

The confusion over whether women are the "same" as men, and whether they can be "different but equal," is at the heart of the current debates between (and about) the sexes. In contrast, I take as my basic premise that there is nothing essential—that is, universal and unvarying—in the natures of women and men. Personality traits, abilities, values, motivations, roles, dreams, and desires: all vary across culture and history, and depend on time and place, context and situation. Of course, if you photograph the behavior of women and men at a particular time in history, in a particular situation, you will capture differences. But the error lies in inferring that a snapshot is a lasting picture. What women and men do at a moment in time tells us nothing about what women and men are in some unvarying sense—or about what they can be.

- **The mismeasure of woman**

Not long ago the firm of Price Waterhouse was charged with discrimination in not granting partnership status to a woman named Ann Hopkins. Everyone agreed that Hopkins did her job well. She brought in over $40 million in new business to the firm, far more than any of the eighty-seven other nominees, all of whom were male, and forty-seven of whom were invited to become partners. Most of the opposition to Hopkins came from brief comments from the partners who had had limited contact with her and were unaware of her track record. They described her as "macho," harsh, and aggressive, and one speculated that she "may have overcompensated for being a woman." One man, trying to be helpful, advised her to "walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear make-up, have her hair styled, and wear jewelry."
Ann Hopkins’s dilemma—whether a woman is supposed to behave like a man or a woman—is played out a thousand times a day, in the varied domains of women’s lives. A woman who leaves her child in day care worries that she is failing as a mother; but if she leaves her job temporarily to stay home with her child, she worries that she will fall in her career. A woman who cries at work worries whether crying is good, since she is a woman, or wrong, since she is a professional. A woman who spends endless hours taking care of her husband and ailing parents feels that she is doing the right thing as a woman, but the wrong thing as an independent person. A woman who cannot penetrate her husband’s emotional coolness alternates between trying to turn him into one of her expressively cute boyfriends and trying to cure her “dependency” on him.

Of the countless self-help books on the market that address these dilemmas, most direct the reader’s attention to women’s alleged inner flaws and psychological deficiencies. Women’s unhappiness, in many of these accounts, is a result of their fear of independence, fear of codependence, fear of success, fear of failure, or fear of fear. Women are told to be more masculine in some ways and more feminine in others. Each of these explanations has a brief moment in the sun. And each eventually fades from sight, to be replaced by similar explanations that flourish briefly and die, because they do not touch the basic reasons for women’s dilemmas: Inequities and ambiguities about “woman’s place” are built into the structure of our lives and society. These dilemmas are normal for women. They will persist as long as women look exclusively inward to their psyches and biology instead of outward to their circumstances, and as long as women blame themselves for not measuring up.

It may seem, after two decades of the modern women’s movement, that issues of difference and equality have been talked into the ground, that equality has been won. Unquestionably, women have made great progress. But our society continues to fight a war over the proper place of women, and the battleground is the female body. Once again we are in the midst of a pronatalist revival that praises motherhood as women’s basic need and talent, and that persists in trying to limit and control women’s reproductive choices. Once again we are hearing arguments about women’s nature, their unreliable physiology, their unmasculine hormones and brains. And once again

Hopkins’s supporters described her behavior as outspoken, independent, self-confident, assertive, and courageous. Her detractors interpreted the same behavior as overbearing, arrogant, self-centered, and abrasive. “Why is it,” asked Lynn Hecht Schafran, an attorney on Hopkins’s case, “that men can be bastards and women must wear pearls and smile?”

At the same time that the Hopkins case was wending its way to the Supreme Court (where she eventually won), an attorney named Brenda Taylor lost her job because she was too feminine: she favored short skirts, designer blouses, ornate jewelry, and spike heels. Her boss told her that she looked like a “bimbo,” and she was fired after she complained about his remarks to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Ann Hopkins and Brenda Taylor illustrate the pressures on modern women to be feminine and masculine, to be different from men but also the same. Is a woman supposed to behave like an ideal man, in which case her male colleagues will accuse her of being too feminine and weak, or like an ideal female, in which case her male colleagues will accuse her of being too masculine and strong?

We will never know the truth about Ann Hopkins—whether she was outspoken or overbearing, confident or arrogant—because both sets of perceptions are true, from the beholder’s standpoint. But by framing the problem as one of her personality, her colleagues deflect attention from the systematic practices of their company and their own behavior. Suppose, instead, we ask: Under what conditions is the negative stereotype of women like Hopkins more likely to occur? The answer, according to research summarized in a brief prepared by the American Psychological Association on behalf of Hopkins, is that men are likely to behave like the Price Waterhouse partners under three conditions: when the woman (or minority) is a token member of the organization; when the criteria used to evaluate the woman are ambiguous; and when observers lack necessary information to evaluate the woman’s work. All three conditions were met in Hopkins’s situation. She could have read 435 books on how to behave, and they would have failed her. She could have gone to work dressed in a muu-muu or Saran Wrap, and she still would have lost that promotion. In this case, her personality had nothing to do with it.
we are hearing about the problems that face women who wish to combine careers and families, as experts warn of the dangers of day care, the stresses of being superwomen, the empty satisfactions of being corporate executives.

Researchers in the fields of science, medicine, and psychology all celebrate a renewed emphasis on biological explanations of women's behavior and a medical approach to women's problems and their cures. They enthusiastically seek physiological differences in brain structure and function, biochemical reasons that more women than men suffer from depression, and hormonal changes that supposedly account for women's (but not men's) moods and abilities. Their assertions are more likely to make the news than is the evidence that contradicts them. Similarly, women hear much less these days about the psychological benefits of having many roles and sources of esteem, let alone the benefits of having a personal income.

In *The Mismeasure of Man*, the scientist Stephen Jay Gould showed how science has been used and abused in the study of intelligence to serve a larger social and political agenda: to confirm the prejudice that some groups are assigned to their subordinate roles "by the harsh dictates of nature." The mismeasure of woman persists because it, too, reflects and serves society's prejudices. Views of woman's "natural" differences from man justify a status quo that divides work, psychological qualities, and family responsibilities into "his" and "hers." Those who are dominant have an interest in maintaining their difference from others, attributing those differences to "the harsh dictates of nature," and obscuring the unequal arrangements that benefit them.

Throughout this book, I will be examining the stories behind the headlines and popular theories of sex differences, traveling the trail of the universal male, showing how the belief in male normalcy and female deficiency guides scientific inquiry, shapes its results, and determines which findings make the news and which findings we live by. The following chapters will offer some new ways of looking at the old dilemmas that women and men confront daily. *My goal is not to analyze, let alone solve, all the problems that women and men face in their complex lives. But by bringing hidden assumptions into the light, I hope to show how our ways of thinking about women and men lead to certain predictable results for all of us: in law and medicine, in social reform, in standards of mental health, in the intimacies of sex and love, and in our private reveries of what is possible.*