

Woman, Womyn, Wom: A Word of One's Own*By Deborah Hauser*

"It is taken for granted that a work reveals the artist's soul as well as his mind" writes Jacques Barzun in From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life 1500 to the Present (67). Barzun is referring to an unspecified Renaissance artist, to Renaissance artists in a general, abstract sense, yet he uses the masculine third person singular pronoun "his". Were all Renaissance artists men? Are only male Renaissance artists worthy of Barzun's (and the reader's) attention? Are women merely hypersensitive to the use of the male pronouns "he" and "his" to refer to individuals of unspecified gender as suggested by Calvert Watkins, Chair of the Linguistics Department at Harvard Divinity School who coined the phrase "pronoun envy"? (Harvard Crimson, 26 November 1971, 17 qtd. in Livia 3)

While Barzun defends his use of the word "man" to refer to both men and women, his argument does not address his generic use of the male pronouns. In a footnote he explains " 'Man' is used throughout in the sense of human being(s) of either sex, except when the context makes it clear that the secondary sense of male is intended" (xiv). Only once does Barzun use the phrase "Renaissance man *or woman*" (79) and he does so to lead us into his "digression" on the word "man". He defends his usage of the word "man" as "the quick neutral word that good prose requires" (83) and presents four reasons for "prolonging that usage": "etymology, convenience, the unsuspected incompleteness of 'man and woman,' and literary tradition" (82). He argues that "...any sex-conscious practice defeats itself by sidetracking the thought from the matter in hand to a social issue- an important one... And on that issue, it is hardly plausible to think that tinkering with words will do anything to enhance respect for women among people who do not feel any, or increase women's authority and earnings in places where prejudice is entrenched" (83). It is true that respect for women on the written page is not likely to translate into immediate respect for women in the world but why use the pen to perpetuate gender bias when it is just as "convenient" and "complete" to include women and enhance at least their self-respect if not their status in society? Barzun writes "It is taken for granted that a work reveals the artist's soul as well as his mind" but it takes little "tinkering" to include women and write: "It is taken for granted that a work reveals the *artists'* soul as well as *their* mind". Literary tradition is something to be revered and preserved but not necessarily perpetuated. Literary tradition enables us to accept a well-known phrase such as "Renaissance Man". Political correctness does not require us to rewrite our literary history. In fact, gender bias in the text of historical literature reflects women's social status during the period the text was written and should not be revised. However, literary tradition should not be used to justify the use of what Wales terms a "pronoun of laziness" (114) referring to the use of "he" as a generic pronoun.

Barzun's digression has remained a source of irritation to me since I read it over two years ago but it was only while studying the history of the English language that I acquired the knowledge to investigate and respond to his etymological argument for the present day use of the word "man" to refer to both man and woman. My research has confirmed my intuitive reaction to Barzun's claims: the present day usage of the word "man" includes woman no more than the word "woman" includes man. The major style guides warn against the practice of using "man" and the male pronouns to refer to men and women. The Chicago Manual of Style notes that "A good writer can usually recast the sentence to eliminate the need for any personal pronoun at all" (157). The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage reminds writers that "Sexual equality is no longer exotic; and its advocacy does not necessarily warrant the label *feminist* or *feminism*" (206). Both publications encourage writers to avoid generic use of the male pronouns by eliminating the need for a personal pronoun or by using a plural sentence construction and the generic plural pronoun "they".

It is relatively easy to argue against "convenience, incompleteness...and literary tradition" as the basis of continued preference for the masculine to the exclusion of the feminine in present day formal written English. It was the etymological defense that caused me some concern: "...*man* cannot possibly mean *male* only...The word man has...two related meanings...The Sanskrit root *man*, *manu*, denotes nothing but the human being..." (Barzun 82). I had anticipated that "man" and "human" were related words which would lend support to Barzun's claim. To my surprise these two words, although similar in meaning, are not cognate. Human was derived from "humain(e)" (French) and "humanus" (Latin) ("Human") and is completely unrelated to "man" ("Human," def.)

Morphologically, the word man is a base root that entered Old English from "Germanic bases rel. to Sanskrit manu for man, mankind" ("Man," def.). It is true that the original, Old English usage of man referred to a human of either sex as well as to a male person: "A human being (formerly explicitly irrespective of sex or age), a person (def. I1) and "An adult male person, as opp. to a woman..." (def. II 3). However, by Middle English the term man had experienced a semantic shift and was no longer used to refer to man or woman but was used to refer to man exclusively: "An adult male eminently endowed with manly qualities. Also, a (male) person of importance" (def. II 3 b). Although Barzun's etymological argument is technically correct based on the Sanskrit origin and Old English usage of the word "man", he ignores the semantic shift and change in usage that occurred in Middle English. In effect, Barzun suggests that we ignore changes occurring after the year 1100 and retain the ancient usage of the term "man" as referring to both man and woman.

Not only does usage and definition since the Middle Ages support an argument against the contemporary use of man as a gender neutral noun but a closer look at the Sanskrit root, manu, reveals that manu is the name of a male figure in Hindu mythology. The myth of Manu resembles the Christian tale of Noah's Ark.

Manu builds a ship to survive a great flood after which a daughter is "miraculously" born to him with which he repopulates the human race (1911encyclopedia.org). Therefore, manu, at its origin, refers to male person, posing a contradiction between etymology and usage in which the name of a male figure is used to refer to both man and woman.

It is interesting that Barzun offers the following quote from the Bible to support his position: "And God created Man, male and female" (Genesis qtd. in Barzun, 82). It seems that both the word "manu" and the usage of the word "man" reflect a religious bias favoring the use of the word for "man" to refer to both man and woman. Another version of Genesis reads: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (King James Bible line 27). This line is ambiguous and I am not convinced that it refers to both male and female as "man". "God created man in his own image..." This gives us the creation of "man" in God's own image. God is referred to by the masculine pronoun "his" thereby indicating that God is male and suggesting that man, created in God's image, is also male. The word "god" is derived from the Germanic "guthan" and was originally neuter, however, "the gender shifted to masc. after the coming of Christianity" (www.etymonline.com). The next phrase also refers to God as male ("him") and now also refers to man as male ("him"). It is only in the third and last section of the line that we are given both "male and female". If, as Barzun suggests, we read "man" as "man and woman", how do we reconcile that with the use of the masculine singular third person pronoun "him" that refers back to "man"? In my reading of Genesis, "God," "man", and "him" are singular male entities, therefore, "man" cannot be read as "man and woman". The switch to the third person plural pronoun "they" signals the arrival of the female following the creation of the male.

These creation myths, in which a daughter is "miraculously" born to Manu and Eve is created from Adam's rib, are attempts to deny the reproductive power of women just as the use of the word "man" or the masculine pronouns to refer to women are a linguistic denial of women's existence (or, at the very least, their importance). To free women from this linguistic tyranny and to disassociate woman from man, the alternate spelling "womyn" has been advocated.

It is necessary to examine the etymology and the morphology of the word "woman" before we can state whether an alternative word is needed and whether "womyn" can successfully distance "woman" from "man" linguistically. The term "woman" is derived from the Old English "wifman" ("Woman," def.) I break "wifman" down morphologically as a compound word created from a combination of "wif" and "man". It is important to note that the original German usage "wif" referred to a woman as an adult female and not as a wife (spouse). It acquired the present meaning of a female spouse after it entered the Old English lexicon ("Wife," def.). I cannot explain why, if "wif" was the word for a female adult, it was ever combined with "man". "Wif" alone is a root morpheme complete in and of itself. However, when combined with "man" it becomes a derivational morpheme

in which "wif", for female, modifies and describes "man" for human. The modern word "woman" is no longer a morphological compound but separates out as the root "man" and an affix "wo" further subordinating the female to the male since the prefix "wo" (unlike "wif") is meaningless on its own. This unnecessary welding of "wif" to "man" has irreversibly corrupted the word "woman" by binding the female prefix to the free male morpheme. "Wif", because of the semantic shift from adult female to "wife", is no longer a viable alternative as a term to describe the female without reference to the male.

Detailed study of the proposed alternative "womyn" leads me to conclude, regretfully, that it fails to adequately separate "woman" from "man". Though commonly used as both a singular and a plural noun according to context, it is identified as specifically plural by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary ("Womyn"). It is described as a "non standard" alternative of women "adopted by some feminists to avoid the ending -men" ("Womyn," def.). I can offer no reason why the ending -men is any more objectionable than the ending -man or why "womyn" replaces the plural but not singular. There are two possible morphological interpretations of the word "womyn". The first is to consider it a completely new word; a free morpheme that cannot be broken down into smaller units. Yet, can anyone read "womyn" without reading "woman"? I think the more honest and accurate analysis is to treat "wo" as a derivational prefix to "myn" which is merely an alternative spelling of the free morpheme "man". "Womyn", while it does not succeed as a viable alternative to "woman", does serve the valuable purpose of protesting the linguistic inferiority of women and highlighting the need for language reform.

It is no surprise that "womyn", when recognized at all, retains its non-standard, alternative status. "Womyn" was not listed by the on-line dictionaries of American Heritage, Cambridge or Dictionary.com. The effort to separate "woman" from "man" linguistically is, of course, socially symbolic, highly controversial and certain to meet with resistance. It would be extremely difficult to replace "woman" with an entirely new word. Donald Hook in discussing the need for an English epicene pronoun, notes the rejection of "neologisms" and suggests that the "utilization of familiar constructs used in new ways" is a more amenable solution. Can the familiar existing units of "woman" be used in a new way that will disassociate "woman" from "man"?

I propose "wom" as an alternative to "woman" or "womyn". "Wom" unlike "womyn" succeeds in reducing the word for woman to one morpheme and eliminates man completely rather than just altering the spelling of "man". "Wom" as a three letter word beginning with "w" is morphologically closer to "wif" and would return to the original meaning of "wif" of an adult female. Femaleness would be the essence of the word in contrast to "woman" in which the essence is human first and female only secondarily. I would offer "wom" not as an abbreviated form of "woman" but as cognate with the word "womb" to entirely disassociate it from the word "man". "Wom" from "womb" would represent not

just women's anatomical reproductive capabilities but would symbolically represent women as a "place of origin, development and growth" ("Womb," def. 1.b.) It is not a strange new word nor is it a deviant spelling. It can be viewed as an abbreviated form of "woman" which makes it both familiar and non-threatening. "Womyn" only distinguishes itself from "woman" in written language but "wom" distinguishes itself in spoken language as well. "Wom" is just the sort of hip linguistic shorthand that might become popular with today's young people, especially in e-mail and instant message exchanges. It flows from the instant message to the spoken language and by the time today's adolescents reach their golden years we will write and speak the word "wom" as naturally and effortlessly as we use "woman" today. "Wom" defines woman independently from man, restores to women the reproductive powers denied them by the creation myths and, finally, gives us a word of one's own.

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