

# **BETWEEN MEN AND FEMINISM**

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Edited by  
David Porter

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# **BETWEEN MEN AND FEMINISM**

Edited by  
**DAVID PORTER**

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## Between men and feminism

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*Between Men and Feminism* had its origins in a lively colloquium at St John's College, Cambridge in 1990. It discusses how two decades of feminism have affected the ways men define their own masculinities, and how they have responded in their social, sexual and political lives to the challenges posed by the evolving feminist critiques of patriarchy and maleness itself.

The collection contains a great diversity of approaches and perspectives from Britain and North America. It includes viewpoints from academics, a poet, an educational researcher, and the members of an active men's group. Gay issues feature prominently, as do psychoanalytical views, and a number of the pieces provide a refreshingly personal and practical outlook.

*Between Men and Feminism* shows men finding their own way within the spaces feminism has opened to them, rediscovering their own gendered voices and participating in the transformation of controlling ideologies in their daily lives. These very readable accounts will appeal not only to students in the social sciences and gender studies, but to all men who find themselves responding to the feminist challenge.

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# Between men and feminism

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Edited by David Porter



London and New York

For my parents

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## Contributors

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**Joseph Bristow** is a lecturer in English literature at the University of York. He previously taught at Sheffield City Polytechnic. His books include *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (1991) and *Robert Browning: New Readings* (1991). He has recently edited *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* and *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Earnest and Related Writings* (both Routledge, 1992).



The **Cambridge Men's Group** is a small circle of men in the Cambridge community who have met fortnightly since 1984 to discuss issues of gender and masculinity in their daily lives. The present essay is their first experiment in collaborative writing, but they have given group presentations, helped to set up other men's groups, and participated in national men's anti-sexism events in the UK.

**John Forrester** is a lecturer in history and philosophy of science at Cambridge University. He is the author of *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis* (1980), *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (1990) and, with Lisa Appignanesi, *Freud's Women* (1992).

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**David Porter**, a graduate of Cornell and Cambridge Universities, is currently a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at Stanford. He has written on Kafka's *The Trial* and on issues of sexuality and desire in medieval poetry, and was the founding

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**Andrea Spurling** has worked as an independent research consultant in the area of graduate career development since 1980. In 1988 she was appointed to run the *Women in Higher Education Project* at King's College, Cambridge. This project identified factors inhibiting women's progress to senior academic levels at Cambridge University, and contributed to changes in policy and practice in the College and in the University. She is currently Head of Programmes at The Council for Industry and Higher Education in London, where she manages a research-based project on the use and development of science and engineering graduates in British industry. She is the author of several articles on institutional prejudice and education.

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At Stanford, the enthusiastic support of my advisors Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Herbert Lindenberger enabled me to integrate my work on the book into a full-time graduate program, and Patricia Parker provided much-needed encouragement and logistical advice in the final preparation of the manuscript. Karen Rezendes provided valuable administrative support, and Scott Mackey, in never-ending discussions, challenged me to keep the volume's feet on the ground, and to edit for the broader audience my title seemed to imply. I would also like to acknowledge Biddy Martin, whose excellent seminar on feminist theory got me thinking about these things at Cornell, and Jen Ruesink, who in this course and afterwards helped me work through their implications for my own life.

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Finally, a very special thanks to Lan Wang, whose generosity, affection, and encouragement have made the book a source of new meanings and pleasures for me in the final stages of its preparation, and to my parents, who have given me the faith and courage to follow them in what they have done.

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# Introduction

*David Porter*

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Cambridge University, for all its charms, has never been a particularly hospitable place for women. When Virginia Woolf arrived in 1928 to give the series of lectures that would later become *A Room of One's Own*, she was whisked away from a famous college library and served plain gravy soup for dinner, both on account of her sex. By the time Shere Hite appeared 62 years later to speak on her most recent research on women and love, the doors had opened and the food improved, but little beneath the surface had changed. The last all-male colleges had finally admitted women only two years previously, but few sectors of the university establishment were ready to accept the newcomers as full and equal members. In tutorials, rowing clubs, and even faculty meetings, women at Cambridge continued to meet with a potent mixture of resentment, condescension, and contempt.

Virginia Woolf responded with an appeal to women to claim for themselves a place from which to speak, a space within which to develop their voices as thinkers and writers, to cultivate that warm intellectual glow of the poets that circumstances and ideology had stifled for so long. When Shere Hite approached the podium at the Cambridge Union, she was ready to issue a different call. Though Cambridge as an institution resisted the fact, she spoke for a generation of women who had acquired, through feminism, new and powerful voices, and who had articulated thereby both thorough-going critiques of the culture of patriarchy and models for restructuring social relationships in every cultural sphere. Her talk that evening challenged men to come to grips with the on-going 'cultural revolution' she described, and to re-position themselves in relation to its new readings of love, gender, and sexuality.

There was nothing new, of course, in another invitation to men to reform their ways. But neither did the response Hite evoked from a male graduate student in the audience come as much of a surprise: 'I've heard so many times that men are the problem,' he said, 'that our fathers were the problem, that I am the problem now. I've been told I should change, rebuild my relationships from scratch, become a new, pro-feminist man. But frankly, these sorts of suggestions don't help me much, and neither does all the guilt. Maybe you can give me a straight answer. What is a man supposed to do?'

Her reply, however obvious in retrospect, was something of a revelation to me at the time, and gave rise, in a roundabout way, to the writing of this book. 'Talk to men,' she said. And in tones that made clear she'd given this reply many times before, she explained that although introspection and a commitment to personal change on the part of men were essential to the feminist project she envisioned, they would come to nothing without the simultaneous foundation of male communities of discourse dedicated to addressing these issues in a more public sphere, and conveying their urgency to that majority of men for whom feminism remained a negligible concern, or perhaps more commonly, an irritating thorn in the side.

The frustrated graduate student, it seemed to me, had spoken from within a chasm that Hite's hour at the lectern had opened somewhere beneath our feet. On the one hand, here was Cambridge, the Cambridge Union Society, no less, that paragon of elitist, male traditionalism where Members of Parliament and their natural successors sparred gamely over points of policy and the future of the Commonwealth. On the other was the voice of a woman who, however controversial her assumptions and her claims, seemed to speak at that moment for a solid and autonomous cultural formation that had taken shape somehow outside the Union's hallowed halls. The man's question had, for a moment, evoked the gulf between these two safe shores. Tentatively rejecting the first, but being a stranger to the second, he seemed to be groping, however cautiously, for a position between them to call his own.

Hite's suggestion would imply that any such space is primarily a discursive one, to be explored and mapped by men in talking to one another, reconstructing masculinity by coming to know it in all its forms, listening critically to its embodied voices



and responding actively to what they hear. While such a project must inevitably draw on feminism for both its inspiration and its analytical tools, the nature of this relationship must be kept clear, in order to avoid gestures of appropriation of feminist space, or the temptation of self-vindication by association with it. Conversely, while men involved in such a dialogue will often strive to distance themselves from certain aspects of their own deeply gendered histories, the most compelling voices to emerge from this process will surely be those that engage directly with these histories in order to re-evaluate and potentially transform them.

The colloquium at St John's College for which most of the essays in this collection were first prepared grew out of my own desire to prompt an exploration of these discursive spaces in a setting where, as far as I could tell, the chasms were immense, and where among men, anyway, silence reigned. Hoping to bring as wide a range of perspectives to bear as possible on an elusive if provocative topic, I invited speakers from a number of fields within the university and a number of occupations outside it to present papers on topics of their choice under the rubric of 'Men and Feminism.' In the end, twelve took part in the six-week series in the spring of 1990.

Naomi Segal and John Forrester led off the colloquium with their papers on 'Why Can't a Good Man be Sexy? Why Can't a Sexy Man be Good?' and 'What Do Men Want?' to an audience that overflowed by a considerable margin the capacity of the modest meeting room we'd been assigned. The evident drawing power of the titles and the animated discussion that followed these and the subsequent presentations convinced me that there was in fact a space here that many others were anxious to explore. The primary concerns running through the series seemed to be how men, real, individual, embodied men – as opposed to the abstraction that feminism takes as its target in the popular imagination – had responded to the various interrogations of masculine identity that they had faced in the last twenty years, how women, in turn, viewed these responses (or the absence thereof), and how the masculinities represented in gay male culture illuminated both the violent agonies and the creative potentials of significant departures from dominant cultural norms.

Although the increasing currency of such questions among male academics can be glimpsed by paging through the