



## Thinking about "The Mermaid and the Minotaur"

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# THINKING ABOUT THE MERMAID AND THE MINOTAUR

ANN SNITOW

## *Summary of the Argument*

*“Woman” will always be regarded as dangerous and debased as long as it is she, and she alone, who first introduces us as infants to the mixed blessing of being human. This is the core argument of The Mermaid and the Minotaur, in which Dorothy Dinnerstein describes the asymmetry between men and women which we experience at the heart of all our social and sexual life.<sup>1</sup> To Dinnerstein, this asymmetry in sexual roles is being crucially reinforced by the way we continue (though with less and less biological necessity) to maintain infancy as a kingdom ruled only by mother.*

*From this core idea proliferates a great number of observations about our partial, tenuous and deformed humanity. Men and women have divided up human traits between them and they have struck a bargain of interdependence.*

*Men agree to build the world while women agree both to support them in this struggle and to give vent, like harmless jesters, to the knowledge both sexes have that “there is something trivial and empty, ugly and sad, in what he does.” A proverb records this bargain: Men must work and women must weep.*

*Traditionally both sexes have felt fairly comfortable with this arrangement because both have been mother-reared. That is to say, both began life seeing “Woman” as an all powerful provider. As a result of this first memory of “Woman,” she has always been defined as a quasi-person, as a sort of infinitely exploitable natural resource which, like nature, has the power to turn nasty but which is bounteous when controlled. She bears the guilt for our discovery as infants that we cannot command the world, that we are flesh. Our mother’s separate subjectivity, which is invisible to us as infants, later becomes an insult to our childish belief that she is there to serve us. We continue to feel that she is not, or should not be, a complete person in herself.*

*Males compensate for their original powerlessness by controlling women in the adult world. Female infants have the same ambivalent feelings of passionate love and rapacity toward their mothers, but since they must ultimately become female figures themselves, they split these feelings off from each other. They join with men in distrusting female power and share with men a preference for male leadership in adult life, a leadership they, too, see as cleaner, more finite than the overwhelming first power of "Mother." Women often sacrifice sexual impulsivity and many kinds of spontaneous and natural world-building activity to their fear of overwhelming men. They recognize the quality and source of male fear of woman and know that to call this fear forth is to break the tenuous balance which is the only promise of sexual partnership.*

*Dinnerstein argues that we are now at a moment in human history when the elaborate symbiosis between the sexes contributes to the undermining of our chances for survival as a species. The male project has gotten out of hand; it's gotten more and more abstracted and farther and farther away from the original energies that were progressive in it. And the female absence from the male world-building project excludes traditions of nurturance from the public sphere that are now necessary for human survival.*

*In this crisis, Dinnerstein worries about the mothers. How will they manage during this period of painful transition? The percentage of time childbearing and childrearing must play in the lifespan of women is reduced; the old sexual divisions of labor are no longer technically necessary and must change if we are to adapt as a species to our shrinking resources. How will this enormous pressure toward change be enacted in our daily life? Right now women are left with their old tasks as mothers; they are asked to do new ones, to participate more directly than before in social change, while men, also aware that the old system is breaking down, are giving women less and less support for either their old tasks or their new.*

*Yet *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* has its own species of qualified optimism. When a system breaks down, as our old socio-sexual symbiosis is breaking down, there is a human drive to reconstruct. Dinnerstein offers her book as a suggestive map for this reconstruction. She puts up sign posts: Here, she says, are the reasons why women find it hard to work together in groups. (They fear the powerful mother in each other.) Here are women's strengths for allying with each other. (They have the deep first love of a woman—their mothers—to draw on as a source of intimacy and real sharing.) Here are the reasons why men are increasingly*

*unable to protect and love us. (The world-building project traditionally theirs is in crisis. They must change their relation to that other first parent, mother nature, whom they once believed limitless in bounty, or they—and we all—will die.)*

*The political implication of Dinnerstein's argument is that men and women have to raise children together. Both men and women must guide children through their first encounter with life, through the pain of being helpless, of not knowing what the world is, of having to be channeled and controlled. Dinnerstein writes:*

*When men start participating as deeply as women in the initiation of infants into the human estate, when both male and female parents come to carry for all of us the special meanings of early childhood, the trouble we have reconciling these meanings with person-ness will finally be faced. The consequence, of course, will be a fuller and more realistic, a kinder and at the same time more demanding, definition of person-ness.*

*And there would be other consequences. As long as we can use women as scapegoats for our discontents, we need not face the real tyrants. Dinnerstein insists that "the stone walls that activism runs into have buried foundations." She suspects that as long as we have conquered "Mother," the first tyrant we know, we are often content to suffer under other, less primitively frightening tyrants. Our rebellions are marred by our incomplete grasp of our shared human condition in which each one of us must both work and weep, both enterprise and criticize the products of our enterprise. The old sexual divisions have infantilized us, have bestialized us. To rebel, we must be more fully human.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*The problem with summarizing Dinnerstein's argument in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* as I have tried to do here is that in both construction and meaning the book is complex and experimental. Dinnerstein refuses to simplify. Without ever calling the female monopoly of child care the cause of misogyny, oppression, tyranny, or the rape of nature by men, Dinnerstein makes it clear that there is an organic, dialectical connection among these things, that each one helps keep the others in place.*

*Dinnerstein's male mentors such as Freud and Norman O. Brown have seen the primacy of "Mother" but they have assumed her symbolic meaning to infants as a biological constant. Dinnerstein's feminism has reordered their material, suddenly bringing female power over children into history and recognizing it as a condition that is always evolving and that now must be more radically and consciously altered if we are to develop in ways that we wish—and that we must—to survive as a species.*

*Few men have dared to write as circuitously and tentatively as Dinnerstein. Yet what man has said so much about "the division of responsibility, opportunity, and privilege that prevails between male and female humans, and the patterns of psychological interdependence that are implicit in this division," has stitched so many bits and pieces together, without succumbing to the temptation to snip off all the loose ends and neatly present a theory? When I say that Dinnerstein's writing is circular and invertebrate I mean that as the beginning of the highest praise. She is so aware that some things cannot be proved, that oversimplification will get us nowhere, and that recriminations are in vain, that she has removed herself from the usual categories of scholarship, science, and political writing. She is, very simply, one of the great humanists we have writing now. With this caveat to anyone who hopes that this summary can be any substitute for the original, rich and complex argument, let me move on to talk about Dinnerstein in quite another way.*

### A Conversation With Dinnerstein

We are mermaids or minotaurs,  
only half human. We sense a  
monstrosity about ourselves.

Dorothy Dinnerstein

About the maladaptive relations between man and woman which Dorothy Dinnerstein describes, I, and we all, have much too much experience.

Take the following scenes:

A male friend I've known well for years turns out to have a daughter. This fact comes out because I happen to tell him about *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*; otherwise I might never have known of it.

"How old is your daughter?"

My friend casts his head back and makes counting gestures with his fingers. Then he says, with some surprise, "She must be about six now!"

My friend doesn't think of his daughter as a secret; a perfect repression obviates the need for secrets. After making one hospital visit shortly after she was born, he has never seen his daughter again.

To me this fact is so stunning that I would like to take Dinnerstein's ideas about the loss we all sustain through the absence of our fathers during our first introduction to life and carve them with a cleaver on my friend's smooth and empty heart.

Another, pre-Dinnerstein memory:

A man I used to love once confided in me that he didn't think I would be a whole person, ever, if I didn't have a child. In my journal I wrote the following fantasy:

I am pregnant. (My lover dislikes birth control; it offends his potency, which my pregnancy proves.) I give him a choice: an abortion or he keeps the baby, not hiring some other woman to nurse it but taking care of it himself. Hating abortion far worse than birth control, he takes the second alternative. A daughter is born. When my lover brings my daughter to visit me, the baby cries and he is forced to interrupt himself to go and pick her up. The baby's schedule keeps him from taking trips or making money. I have a good job so I give him child support and I say, "A few more years like this, having the experiences of women, and you'll be the wisest man in America." For the first time he begins to understand me. I stay away and don't mind that my daughter cries on the rare occasions I see her; after all, it's a wise child that knows its blood mother if that mother has the freedom to go away and lacks the usual guilt to make her stay. Meanwhile, my lover is bringing up my daughter. This experience is the only one that could make him into a fit companion.

At the time I made this journal entry, I knew only that my lover had said something unforgivable, and, worse, something against which I was powerless to defend myself. Now, reading Dinnerstein has clarified these emotions: I had half thought I was a whole human being; my friend reminded me that to him I was not. But, as Dinnerstein argues, this idea is in itself cruelly inhuman. My friend was afraid of me as an autonomous creature, his mother disturbingly off the leash and on the rampage in the world, or, to use Dinnerstein's metaphor, his mother arisen from the dark, magical sea to walk on land. My lover told me I would not be a complete human being without the experience of motherhood. I wrote my journal entry to contradict him, to claim that it is he who needs this experience in order to be completely human.

These angry fantasies come naturally during our era of breakdown in what Dorothy Dinnerstein calls our "asymmetrical sexual arrangements." The female desire to carve a political tract on the unresponsive male heart, the self-defeating fantasy of giving a child away—these extremities are the products of desperation, dizzy efforts to correct an increasingly pathological imbalance in the roles of the sexes.

Motherhood is a condition in crisis. Whichever fantasy each one of us has, either dreaming of leaving the baby with father forever or dreaming of taking the baby back from father (from patriarchal control) and never letting him come near it again, either way we

must eventually find whatever is irreducible in motherhood, and whatever is malleable in it, and make a radical change.

The two stories I have told are Dinnersteinian fables. In the first we see a man who forgot the existence of his daughter. Her needs can have no modifying influence on what he does in the world. He is Dinnerstein's minotaur, "mindless, greedy." He has escaped from mother, and from the mother in himself.

The women in this first story are almost invisible: one is the mother who has been left alone with her child; the other is the writer who wants to carve the truth of the mother's oppression and the child's abandonment on the cold father's heart. But neither really knows how to beard the minotaur in his far-off den. They are Dinnerstein's mermaids, able to love the child but too socially powerless to do more than impotently rage at its father.

In my second story, the mother is now so angry that she refuses to become Dinnerstein's "treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes." She tries to become like the man in the first story; she leaves her child, ignores it when it cries. The woman in this story is the revolutionary, running fast because she knows the old world is just behind her. But to enter the male world which is "free from the chagrins of the nursery," she must sacrifice other human parts of herself. She outruns her own strengths; she exhausts herself. She needs to be nurtured by the love and support of the man and of the child she has left behind, just as for generations they both have flourished by being nurtured by her. If the father has been humanized by mothering, has become at last "a fit companion" then she can enjoy being fully human herself. If he cannot be made a true parent, she is endlessly drawn toward one of two extremes—either total immersion in motherhood or total renunciation of it—in a seesawing effort to create a human balance.

In the world Dinnerstein describes and in the world of my stories there is not as yet a well-established middle ground where the humanness of the minotaur's world-building project and the humanness of the nurturant mother can meet. In her interest in the extremes, mermaid and minotaur, Dinnerstein is not saying there is no such middle ground in our actual social life, between these mythic, half-human roles. (In fact, she always insists that actual men and women do not, and luckily *cannot*, fit comfortably or neatly into these sexual roles.) Rather she is using the myths as metaphors to illustrate the barriers we put between ourselves and change: Dinnerstein is showing us the boxes so we can see how much time we actually spend outside them. *Both* sexes live inside

the roles and outside them, but it is of course women who now feel this contradiction most sharply. When women struggle to create a human, middle position, to combine work, mothering and loving mother-reared men, we are in a condition of terrible stress. (It will surprise no one that Dorothy Dinnerstein once wrote an essay about Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid who, to gain the love of the prince, gives up her tail and gets legs, a sign of wanting to grow up, love man, and be fully human. Andersen's Little Mermaid ends tragically; her prince is not human *enough*, not yet a fit companion; he doesn't recognize her for who she is and on his wedding day to another, she dies.)

I offer these two anecdotes from my journal almost at random. For me, Dinnerstein throws light everywhere. Speaking primarily about one class in one country, middle-class America, she nevertheless diagnoses social symptoms which I suspect further scholarship will confirm are present, and have been present, in very different classes and cultures. Many women have complained about *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* that they have heard this diagnosis before: Once again it is all the mother's fault; the powerful matriarch must be overthrown in order for civilization to progress. We have already heard more than enough about the fear of woman and very little about how to extricate ourselves from this labyrinth of feeling.

Dinnerstein's unique contribution is that she has given this tradition of the powerful mother its full and crushing weight in our history without finally being overwhelmed by it. She has an explanation for the fear and rejection of mother that makes sense. Without making light of the myth of the terrible mother she nevertheless demythologizes it. Without claiming that mother-centered childcare is the *cause* of inequalities between men and women, she nevertheless sees how it confirms us in these inequalities, makes us comfortable with them.

It's easy to misread Dinnerstein at this point, to think that hers is a reductionist's argument: but she offers no primary cause for female oppression, no simple panacea. Instead her discussion is a web of connections and descriptions proliferating from what is, in fact, a rather humble core. Dinnerstein has one thing to say and she tries to say it keeping all its connections with other matters intact. Instead of a linear argument, her book is really a grid whose lines trail off the page where she cannot always follow them, though one often feels how much she would like to. For this very reason it is easy to be frustrated by *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. It raises more questions than it can answer. And to make its positive point, it must again emphasize the negative side of mother in a world which we feel has done that enough already.



In fact, in many respects this book is a mother it's easy to reject. There are so many things it cannot do for us. It fails to incorporate theoretically the enormous ego strength of women, and their very real contribution to world-building so far. It fails to offer any material suggestions for how new childrearing structures could enter our society. It fails to identify clearly (though it often mentions) the cracks in our present situation which might be the points at which changes could most easily be made. What about working class families where the mother is forced to be absent from the home and is a worker in the world? What about large families where children rear each other? What about families where the father is such a tyrant he can never represent for his children an easier alternative to the first, loved parent? Don't other cultures offer evidence of politically suggestive variations in childcare arrangements? Can countercultural experiments really change the mainstream as Dinnerstein hopes and, if so, by what mechanism? What is to prevent the experimenters from becoming the same sort of useless jesters that Dinnerstein says women have always been? How can we more scientifically assess the metaphoric power of Mother in the first two years of life? For example, in a more sexually balanced social environment could the five year old's discoveries of the social similarities between Mommy and Daddy eventually change the overall metaphoric meaning of conscious and subconscious memories? How much can we change the biological primacy of the mother-child tie in the first year of life and how much *should* we change it?<sup>2</sup>

These are legitimate questions about Dinnerstein's work (in fact, if one reads closely, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* raises each one of these questions somewhere or other in a box or a note or a parenthesis) but Dinnerstein cannot answer them. At an interview when I asked her these questions she asked them back at me. They are, very simply, our biggest human questions.<sup>3</sup>

Some women have told me they think that Dinnerstein is too accepting of our patriarchal past. (Certainly my two stories are more unfriendly to men than anything in her book.) Indeed she grants the past its charms. As she said to Jane Lazarre, "The way things go between men and women are so deeply tied up with what we need in a positive way, that we have good reasons for being reluctant to let go of them. If it were not for the fact that now our sexual arrangements are part and parcel of what's killing us, I doubt that we would be tampering with them."<sup>4</sup> This is Dinnerstein's profundity as a social thinker, her wisdom as a psychologist. She is friendly toward our peculiar double nature: We have been—and still are—mermaids and minotaurs, but this asymmetry in our

lives has always frustrated us, has always propelled us out of ourselves toward new forms of social life:

Our prevailing male-female arrangement is rooted in our biological history; it is part of what we have always been. Yet the feelings that make us restless with it—an intolerance of constriction, a resentment of bondage, an urge to grow—are also part of what we have always been.

Dinnerstein admires the human spirit, our capacity for self-transformation. A revolutionary thinker, a historical materialist, she shows us to be always in the process of revolutionizing the conditions of our social life.

She is also a feminist, one who believes that it is women who must make the next step in our species' self-creation. Without calling men villains, Dinnerstein nevertheless believes them to have too many vested interests in the present system to find the strength to change it. Women, she says, will be the ones to change it, if it is to be changed at all.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Dinnerstein, author of *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) is a professor of psychology at the Institute for Cognitive Studies, Rutgers-Newark.

Dorothy Dinnerstein is presently working on another piece of the vast project of which *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* is a part, the project of understanding how our species' traditional social arrangements are now threatening our species' very life. As Dinnerstein describes this next project: "What the book will survey—drawing both upon experimental data and upon descriptive analysis of my own and the reader's life experience—is a number of weaknesses (soft spots or cracks, so to speak) in the human sense of reality, weaknesses which have not been grave enough to menace our survival in the past, but which do menace it in the face of the situation we have by this time gotten ourselves into, and which we may be able to outgrow."

<sup>2</sup>In the formulation of some of these questions I am indebted to Sara Ruddick, Gail Kuenstler and Marilyn Westler, and to Dr. Florence Volkman Pincus who discussed Dinnerstein's work at the Woman's Salon, November 1977, New York City.

<sup>3</sup>My long interview with Dr. Dinnerstein (Spring 1977) deals with the implications of her book for women living alone with children, for feminists, etc.

<sup>4</sup>My thanks to Jane Lazarre who allowed me to transcribe her interview with Dr. Dinnerstein, aired on WBAI-FM, Listener-Sponsored Radio, New York, Spring 1977.