MASCULINITY AND CULTURAL IMAGINARY

Quarrel Between Citizen Lad and Rude Girl

Eloy Fernández Porta



Illustrator: Lara Lars

A verbal dispute between a man and a woman on the subject of gender is a form of oral-based literature that, far from being a genre as such, is found—inserted or diluted—in various expressive manifestations. It can be spotted in dialogue novels such as *Un peso en el mundo* by José María Guelbenzu; it is a constant theme in the autobiographical comics created by Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky as a duo; it is also implicit in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, throughout which the reading process involves imagining the interventions of one or more interlocutors. This text is presented as a parodic inflection point in that code, and at the same time as a false state of the question of some of the issues that permeate contemporary Masculinity Studies.

—If it weren't for women, we men would still live in caves. If it weren't for the gay men who painted on cave walls, nobody would've ever painted a bison. As for straight men… we weren't into the idea of our beloved, warm caves transforming into art galleries dedicated to honouring bison and execrating hunters, and we didn't regret leaving our homes, seeing as they'd become inhospitable due to their new decor and unfit purpose. And anyway, most of us never even managed to hunt down a bison. But we tried. And when we failed, we didn't blame women, or gay men. We blamed ourselves.

—You come out on top in that story. It almost makes me want to become one of you. For the

losses you suffered, in your opinion undeserved; for the nobility with which you think you accepted them; for the efforts you say you've made; for the primitive yet beautiful lost cause you supposedly engaged in; for the defeat you dressed in a Klein blue suit of melancholy, which fits you like a glove. For being victims of History, isn't that it? Oh, what handsome losers you've all been, how zealous your fall…

—There seems to be something beautiful about it, yes. I wouldn't have said it myself… until I started seeing women fall in love with losers. And I've been watching it happen for years.

—There are certainly some foolish women around, as there are also those who are into raw fish or long-distance running. The popularity of Japanese cuisine doesn't make it a universal culinary standard, and you've never dedicated ten minutes of your time to watching a women's 3,000 metre hurdle race. You think that every time a female runner reaches a fence, she stops to decorate it with garlands and white roses.

—I'm not an expert in that matter, really. But I don't recommend anyone to be competitive. Neither men nor women. And it would never occur to me to deny that floral art is an applied art, and in the long run applied arts end up being considered proper Art. Let's hope this doesn't happen sooner than we think, and I catch you talking shit about an art form of which the main creators are all women.

—Floral art will find its way into the Prado, without a doubt. Gender parity won't. But seeing as there'll be some real flowers on display, and not painted by men, many visitors will return home convinced that parity has arrived, and that, from now on, it's all glory and yellow bricks. It's an optical illusion, like the impression that equality day is approaching.

—Well, being a man, floral art… I wouldn't say it's my favourite thing, but it does seem interesting to me, because it's a tradition that…

—Well, to me, and I only resemble men in the way they shit, floral art seems incredibly tacky, and even if it didn't seem that way to me, it would still be tacky. You don't understand what a tradition is. If a creator can choose, from a repertoire of possibilities, the one they feel most capable of carrying out, then they join a tradition. On the other hand, those women who found themselves trapped at home, without the possibility of going to university or living their lives, and had no other choice but to play around with honeysuckles, weren't choosing a tradition, they were killing time in the prison yard. To lessen their sentence. And, of course, when someone takes away the time you need to live and gives you, as spare change, a few hours for your work, during those hours you'll end up making something beautiful, understanding *beauty* as something men think women should create. Don't be fooled: in the main hall of the Prado, at the opening of the flower exhibition, there'll be more men taking selfies to look sensitive than women who are art lovers. It's been more than a century since Duchamp hung what needed to be hung on a wall, it's already a bit late to come and tell us that a bouquet of carnations will lead us to the Pantheon. That's not feminism—it's neo-housewifeism. You guys couldn't get enough of the cupcake craze, so the next time someone tries to convince me that if I transform into a 20th-century housewife I'll feel like Future Eve… I'll answer back with something that

won’t sound girly or flowery at all.

—Damn… well then we must conclude that the curators, artists and art historians who propose this idea are wrong, right?

—It’s worse than that. I make mistakes every day, without fail, from the moment I wake up, but at least my mistakes aren’t tacky and I don’t dedicate myself to selling illusions of emancipation with fragrant petals and no thorns. There’s little more than thorns on that path, and whoever decides to take it without knowing this has failed even before they start walking, and will end up falling onto one of those huge thorns, like the ones Proust was obsessed with.

—Mock us all you want, but you wouldn’t know what failure and falling are if you hadn’t watched us. When have you ever seen, broadcast on every TV, a woman failing woman, or the blow of her fall?

—Very few times, actually. As few as the opportunities we’ve had to triumph and rise above you. He who invents triumph, and reserves it for himself, also reserves disaster exclusively.

—If it’s as you say it was, then isn’t there a certain greatness in disaster? Does the unknown soldier not deserve a monument?

—The first of them deserved it, without a doubt. But they ceased to deserve it when the second of these monuments was erected, and it became clear that bronze and marble would never be used to commemorate the widow of the unknown soldier, who raised three children alone, on a meagre pension, and never had the opportunity to leave the house in search of glory or death, which, in your books, are worth the same. The war she waged, to create the men of the future, was secret, without cheers or medals, it was raw and exhausting, and she won it.

—We knew about that other war, in the letters sent to the camps, stationed next to the battlefield. Not being able to fight in it caused us more sorrow than the certainty that this field would become our grave. We didn’t run from that other war. Nor did we declare ours. No chamberlain gave us the document, the inkwell and the quill. You may not be aware that to sign a Declaration of War you need to know how to read and write. At home, we didn’t have cannons, helmets or submarines, we never came up with a battle plan, and we didn’t even know how to locate the country we were ordered to invade on the map. All of this was imposed on us. They took us away from our jobs, our families, our lives. Call it a disaster, but don’t say that war was created by “men”. War was orchestrated by a chosen few, so superior in the military hierarchy that they seemed more like demigods. A demigod is not a man, and he who is recruited by force is not responsible for carrying out orders from above.

—I see. And the orders to show no mercy, to steal from the dead, to pillage, to rape the widows of the soldiers you killed, I suppose they also came from above?

—Sometimes, yes. Sometimes it was revenge for our own women who’d been raped, for our

friends who agonised for days, their bellies cut open and mutilated. Sometimes it was pure psychopathy. The fact that among psychopaths there are more men than women doesn't mean a thing in terms of masculinity; it's simply a neurological fact that has nothing to do with the lives of most men. As for the rest, I see that you've also preferred to believe that in wars women were the only victims of rape, and that torture is less painful. Or perhaps you think we deserved it. The monument you ask for, which is so necessary, is no less so than the monument to the gang-raped prisoner of war. The veil of censorship that's been draped over these atrocities has led to the belief that a man's death on the battlefield is the result of his delusions of power, and that a woman's death in an airstrike is the result of sexism.

—And that veil of censorship, did female historians impose it? Female novelists? Female journalists? Female filmmakers? All their powers united, against a minority of defenceless men?

—We'll never know what veils they would've imposed if they'd been able to, and I usually hear suspiciously optimistic speculations in this respect. Though we do know that you accept these veils with open arms, whenever they're convenient for you.

—You guys were brutal.

—We were ordered. The brutality came as an added extra. Given the choice, we would've preferred to be forcibly recruited into the Diplomacy Academy, but we weren't so lucky. And, if we'd had the opportunity to attend that Academy, we would've forgotten the lessons after two weeks anyway, without sleeping a wink in the trenches, between the whistle of bullets and the stench of the latrines, each day seeing…

—… your comrades die, I know. I've no doubt it was terrible. But at least your dead have that radiant history, that morbid poetry that has never failed to inspire other atrocities. The victims of the other war don't, the women who died during at-home abortions, during incompetent labour, in medical massacres in search of the origin of hysteria, of nymphomania, of all those superstitions that the clinical establishment used just as Mengele used his prisoners.

—I'd believe that the words *hysteria* and *nymphomania* are the product of male domination if I didn't hear so many women insulting their kind using those same terms.

—Male domination includes creating situations in which internalising a sexist idea, even when it's directed towards one's own gender, even when it could be used against oneself, is a far less terrible option than giving up that idea and ending up alone, speaking in an alternative language others refuse to understand. Regarding the use of language, many friends call each other "hysterical" or "bitches" with affection, humour, tenderness, while going out for drinks and at birthday parties. No social problem has ever been gestated at those parties.

—Also, with that same attitude, many men who aren't part of the problem use terms like *fag* or *poof*. If I'd never heard a gay guy call another "fag", and not with complicity or

tenderness, I'd believe that the term is simply heterophobic; the more I hear it, the more I'm convinced that it's a question of polysemy.

—No. It's not the same to appropriate a term that was coined to insult you, and redefine it, than to continue using, with supposed irony, a term that was invented to marginalise others. Orthotypography is a great invention, but putting an insulting word in quotation marks or substituting roman type for italic type won't demolish the foundations of male dominance.

—It was a woman, not a man, who proposed to correct that term and speak of *inter-masculine domination*. It takes place in warfare, both on the battlefield and on the streets, and it's not exclusive to straight men. The gay leather man who spends hours in the gym and nights in the sauna among neoclassical bodies, while Winckelmann looks down on him approvingly from the heavens, feels far superior than skinny transvestites and, naturally, calls them "sissies". In the same way female athletes also have their own vocabulary to refer to flabby women who've never played sports. It isn't sexism that creates these vocabularies, it's effort. All these words can actually be summed up in a single phrase: "I exert more physical strength in a day than you do in a month."

—That phrase isn't on point, and I don't think you're sufficiently informed about what gets said in women's locker rooms, which weren't invented by women, by the way. In any case, even if what you say is true, that doesn't represent a social problem either, or certainly not a serious one. No newspaper is interested in what football players say at the end of a match. In fact, they don't even give an account of what happens during the match. None of those phrases have the ability to hurt anyone, because, once they're pronounced, they get lost the moment they're said: they've been confined to the same airtight space in which everything that's not convenient about femininity has always been locked away. Football players inhabit a more comfortable space, yes, inside a larger prison. And of course they let them play: you *have* to play in the prison yard, it's mandatory. If the warden sees you leaning against a wall and talking to a fellow inmate for too long, he'll automatically assume you're planning an escape.

—Would you really wish for soccer players to suffer the public overexposure, scrutiny and male hysteria of the sports press? Would you like it if, when stepping out to play on their opponents pitch, instead of hearing the whistling and booing of two thousand people, it was forty thousand? Would you want that to happen to you?

—Perhaps you've heard of Kant's categorical imperative. It's really nice and it sometimes works, but sometimes it doesn't: I don't propose what I think is good for me, not always, as a universal principle. The football player has her body; I have mine. I wouldn't be able to expose myself to two thousand people whistling and booing and, as for you, I know that a sidelong glance at an official reception leaves you half depressed for three days in a row. The football player's vocation includes exposing herself to forty thousand boos, without the slightest doubt. The thing is that if you men were to see a woman take them head on without batting an eyelid, you'd faint on the spot. That's why nobody's interested in the Women's League being broadcast during prime time.

—When you say “nobody”, I’m afraid this includes the majority of women, who, as a matter of fact, don’t spend Sunday afternoons going to the stadium where those matches are played.

—You wouldn’t have seen a penalty kick in your life either, just as you haven’t seen a field hockey penalty, if it weren’t for the fact that the most masculinised press of all presses convinced you, even before you knew how to count, that it was necessary to watch the guy shoot the ball. As for the whistles, boos, insults and media pressure, I’ve never heard Iniesta ask to be protected from it. What makes you think that a player would want to be protected? And by whom? By a group of bodyguards and a book show host? You always have to imagine there’s a male authority that makes sure they don’t fall. You always invent imaginary problems to try to prove there’s no gender asymmetry, but only different ways of expressing aggression.

—I have a few dioptres, but I’m not quite blind. Of course there is gender asymmetry, and it’s certainly not me who has suffered the worst consequences of it, and neither have you, but I’ve been aware of it from as early as you have. Or do you think I didn’t have a mother? Do you think my grandmother was the only housewife in the country who wasn’t addicted to optalidon, to tranquillisers, to some anti-pregnancy pills that if taken by a millennial, she’d have to go straight to A&E? My grandmother got transformed into a junkie, just like so many woman of her generation, and she didn’t even know it…

—Of course she knew. She knew perfectly well. Your grandmother always knew that the optalidons weren’t sweets of Our Lady of the Pillar. But she had no choice: all her friends were doing it. And besides, how many children did she raise alone?

—Five.

—Well, there you go.

—Well, that, like the Cointreau thing, was one of those things that you half know, half don’t… It’s like the scene in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* in which the addict housewife enters the pharmacy for the umpteenth time…

—… and she finds that the rules of the game have changed, yes, and that she now needs a prescription.

—Oh! “What? And on top of that you insult me! You just called me a *drug addic*t!”

—The housewife in that film *knew* she was a drug addict, even though she pretended to believe that the only person who’s a real junkie is the one with a needle in their arm. She had to fake it, just like the journalist who writes an article on the increase in alcohol consumption among teenagers for the umpteenth time, “Oh, what a scandal, I can’t believe it,” as he pretends to ignore that he lives in an alcoholic country, and ends the article by saying: “Well, now that I’ve told you, friends, I’m going to drink a few gin and tonics, seeing as it’s already past eleven in the morning.” You’ll always need to believe they were naive.

—Perhaps you're the one who's naive. In that film, the one who says, "It's no longer possible", is a woman. It was the pharmacists, her lifelong friends, the ones who gave my grandmother that shit, without a prescription or intervention from a doctor. I know you'll tell me that the pharmacists didn't run pharmaceutical companies nor were they the Minister of Health, who turned a blind eye, but as far as collaborating goes, they definitely collaborated. And you're right there: they knew damn well what they were selling, and the effects it had.

—That's right. They were women who were helping each other out, lending each other a hand so as to suffer the least. That was one of the forms of complicity that'd been arranged for them: I'm your friend, I'm your drug dealer, and seeing as you're my friend, I'll turn you into a junkie for life. Female pharmacists were a pawn in a very complex game. And, anyway, I don't see you acting so shocked when your friends pass you the phone number of a trusted dealer, or when they pull out their credit cards when there's no ATM or cash machine in sight. It's hilarious: when men do it, it's okay, but a woman taking drugs? Oh, what a scandal!

—Well, yes, it was a fucking scandal because she had no choice, and her use of drugs wasn't recreational: she took them to endure…

—… the housework, like nowadays everyone and their dog takes cocaine to keep up with the pace of work. The only difference is that raising five children and doing the shopping, housework and laundry was called "her chores", and she didn't get paid for them. She didn't take drugs to celebrate she'd closed a huge deal.

—That doesn't stop it from being a scandal though, and if the pharmacists had been men you wouldn't say they were pawns: you'd say it was their fault. When my grandmother reached the age of fifty, her body was so used to pharmaceuticals that, to relieve a cold, she had to take three paracetamols at once. I saw my grandfather take half a paracetamol, which left him groggy, and my grandmother swallowed all three, one after the other. I saw the gender asymmetry clearly, even though I had no idea what it was called. And I kept on seeing it, because she took all the pills, a well-to-do woman, a bourgeois lady, with Agua del Carmen, which she could drink quietly, chatting with her friends, because it'd been decided that sweet liqueurs aren't for men, and since they aren't for men then they aren't really alcohol, and if they're drunk out of small shot glasses, which aren't snifters and aren't lifted by a hairy hand, then it's clear that they're nothing more than liquid sweets. So the friends who spent the afternoon drinking Agua del Carmen, Marie Brizard, Cointreau, Aromes de Montserrat and Anís del Mono had never tried alcohol, they were just girls drinking sweets. And you tell me I haven't seen gender asymmetry! Yes, there is asymmetry, yes. Those who say the characters in *Mad Men* drink a lot didn't know my grandmother. If they'd put her face to face with Don Draper at a table full of bottles, to see who could stay standing the longest, that poor ad man would've ended up on the floor in an alcohol-induced coma while my grandmother calmly sipped on another glass of Cointreau.

—Cheers to that!



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Eloy Fernández Porta holds a PhD in Humanities from the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF), with an Extraordinary Doctorate Award. He is an essayist and lecturer in theories of culture and contemporary art in the Hispanic and European Studies Program, and also at the Barcelona School of Management, both at the UPF. Notable among his publications are the essays *Homo Sampler* (2008), *Afterpop* (2010), *€®O$* (2010, Anagrama Essay Award), *Emociónese así* (2013, Ciutat de Barcelona Award), *En la confidencia* (2018) and *L'art de fer-ne un gra massa* (2018), all of them edited by Anagrama. He writes regularly for the magazines Rockdelux, Jot Down, A*Desk, and Núvol. His work has been translated into English, French and Portuguese.