



## Book Review: Battling the Binaries? Revisiting ‘He, She and it Revisited’

Els Rommes

### ► To cite this version:

Els Rommes. Book Review: Battling the Binaries? Revisiting ‘He, She and it Revisited’. European Journal of Women’s Studies, 2005, 12 (4), pp.494-496. 10.1177/135050680501200408 . hal-00571230

**HAL Id: hal-00571230**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00571230>**

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

to the Kantian tradition. In an ideal world there would be time to assimilate both, but if I had to choose I guess that Schott will better engage the emerging philosophical imagination.

Margrit Shildrick  
Queen's University Belfast

#### BATTLING THE BINARIES? REVISITING 'HE, SHE AND IT REVISITED'

M. Lie, ed.

*He, She and IT Revisited: New Perspectives on Gender in the Information Society*  
Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2003, 304 pp., ISBN 82-05-31550-7

Even in egalitarian Norway and despite various efforts by the Norwegian government, private organizations, researchers and educators, a gender gap remains in the design and use of computers and the Internet. This book collects recent work by Norwegian scholars to achieve 'a better understanding of how and if ICTs become gendered and how they also may become "degendered" by both design and user activities' (p. 29). The main issue addressed in this book is the influence of the hegemonic discourse of gender and ICTs on policy-makers, designers and users.

Although the sole focus on Norwegian researchers and Norwegian empirical material is a narrow one for an edited book and, in this respect, the title is misleading, this book does present an important contribution to gender and ICT studies. Norway is known for its high level of ICT penetration and the equality-oriented politics of the government, which Norwegians call 'state feminism'. Hence, an investigation into the effectiveness of this politics may well provide insight into the situation of other European countries. Moreover, Norwegian gender and ICT researchers have built up an impressive, high-quality body of research that dates back to the 1970s, making Norway one of the leading countries in gender and ICT research from a social studies of technology and co-constructivist perspective.

In the chapter 'Male Positioning Strategies in Relation to Computing', Corneliussen identifies the hegemonic discourse on gender and ICTs as follows: experience, interest and knowledge of computers are expected of men, and men are related to activities such as the 'actual handling of the computer (technical knowledge, software development) and activities related to play (computer games)' (p. 110). This subject position is condensed in the image of the hacker. This is a persuasive stereotype, which keeps girls and women away from computers as they vigorously reject this style of life and compulsive way of engaging with technology. Hence, the subject position that remains for, and is associated with women, is the opposite of the hacker, a position of no special interest, experience or knowledge of computers. For women, the computer is supposed to be 'useful or a necessity, and ... the computer first and foremost is seen as a tool for concrete objectives', e.g. for the use of email and word-processing (p. 112). In all the chapters, it seems that regardless of whether policy-makers, commercial firms and individual computer users accept the myth (and most do), they have been influenced by it.

In the chapter 'Forget the Hacker? A Critical Re-Appraisal of Norwegian Studies of Gender and ICT', Gansmo, Lagesen and Sørensen are interested in the extent to which researchers themselves 'may contribute to the conservation of unfortunate symbolic practices related to the production of misleading gendered dualisms' (p. 37). Interestingly, perhaps one of the most important publications of Norwegian researchers in the past did counter the hacker stereotype by showing

non-stereotypical practices among Norwegian hackers (Håpnes and Sørensen, 1995). Apparently, 'doing things differently' and an analysis of these practices did not correct the hacker stereotype, a conclusion which the authors of this chapter do not seem to draw. Instead, they rather conclude that researchers should just 'forget about the hacker' (p. 68), which does not seem like a realistic option. This chapter does, however, offer a very good, broad and thorough overview of the main Norwegian research on gender and ICT.

In various chapters, the consequences of the hegemonic discourse for equal opportunities policies in its broadest sense are discussed. In Chapter 5, 'Limits of State Feminism: Chaotic Translations of the "Girls and Computing" Problem', Gansmo considers the Norwegian education policy on girls and computers. And in Chapter 8, 'Don't Girls Want to Have Fun? Designing Multimedia for Women', the commercial design of a CD-Rom for girls and an Internet service 'for the whole family' are studied. Neither the governmental policy-makers nor the commercial designers have exploited, what the authors Spilker and Sørensen call, 'the potential to co-construct gender and ICT in a more dynamic and heterogeneous way' (p. 250). Perhaps even more interesting is the chapter 'Advertising Computer Science to Women (Or Was it the Other Way Around?)' by Lagesen. In this chapter, advertisement campaigns to change the image of computer science in the hope of attracting more female students to computer science are studied. The campaigns aimed at directly challenging the symbolic connection between computers and masculinity, by stating that 'women's competences, such as communication skills, are also needed in computer science'. As Lie writes in the introduction, it is interesting to observe that people 'apparently find it easier to redefine what ICT is than to change their own and other people's ideas of gender differences' (p. 29).

The researchers in this book have found that most policies have uncritically adopted the dominant discourse, resulting in actually reinforcing gender differences. Hence, Lie concludes that a main 'challenge for policy makers in this field is to untie such dichotomous understandings of men and women and of ICT skills' (p. 28). The dangers of the politics of difference are neatly summed up by Lagesen: they 'reinforce gender stereotyping, which in turn may limit the spaces for action by women in relation to ICT', 'dichotomies are easily ranked' (and usually the masculine is ranked higher), 'it is naïve to think that arguments, previously used to exclude women, may simply be transformed into arguments to include them' and, last but not least, women as 'good communicators and good with people' will easily be understood as the opposite of 'good with technology' (pp. 100, 101).

Probably the most interesting and certainly the richest empirical chapters of *He, She and IT Revisited* analyse how the dominant discourse on gender and computing influences people's individual gender identities: what they do, what they say they do and where they are. In the aforementioned chapter by Corneliussen, there is discussion of how male computer scientists 'possess different abilities of meeting the discourse's expectations of men, and they also employ different positioning strategies in their relations to computing', but what they share is that 'men and computer knowledge are so closely connected within this discourse, that being a man may in itself function as a qualification, in order to be regarded as computer skilled' (p. 133). Hence, choosing computer science and acquiring computer skills seems like an easy choice for most of them, even if they differ in how much experience and skills they have acquired.

In contrast, Håpnes and Rasmussen studied 14- to 16-year-old girls' identity construction in relation to computers in the chapter 'Gendering Technology: Young Girls Negotiating ICT and Gender'. They define themselves as opposite to

'young children or guys' (p. 177) and computers at the same time – particularly by counterposing themselves against male computer game playing. However, the computer did fit perfectly in the girls' culture as long as they perceived what they did with the computer as 'social', i.e. not 'nerdy' activities. As a 'Typing Room', the computer was 'used for reflecting upon oneself and on relations to classmates' (p. 185), whereas the computer as 'Information Market' functioned 'in the same way as pop magazines and the weekly tabloids do' (p. 188) and as 'Meeting-Place' the girls could use the computer to chat for hours (p. 190). Unfortunately, the authors had to conclude that in the end, 'It seems that the male gendering of ICT was not disturbed by the wide use by girls' (p. 197), which begs the question what activities, words or policies would change the dominant discourse on computers and the masculine nerd?

Perhaps the words of Internet cafe users, studied by Laegran in the chapter 'Just Another Boys' Room? Internet Cafés as Gendered Technosocial Spaces', offer an opening to a less masculine interpretation of the nerd stereotype? She describes how 'the stereotyped label of embodied computer enthusiasts, signified by antisociality and a less desired body appearance, is renegotiated locally to change the content [to one] based on competence and skills' (p. 215), making the nerd stereotype more accessible for women. Nevertheless, Laegran also shows how gender segregation is maintained in Internet cafes, either in space within the cafe or in a division of time between the various cafe users. Hence, these cafes are not very effective in attracting women to computers, or in disturbing the hegemonic discourse.

In the final chapter, 'The New Amazons: Gender Symbolism on the Net', Lie offers an important discussion and rethinking of the hard-to-grasp symbolic level on which computers and masculinities have become connected. Moreover, on the basis of her analysis of computer games such as the SIMS and Tomb Raider's Lara Croft, she concludes that a new model of gender might be appropriate nowadays, a model in which gender is conceived as 'an "empty shell" which can be filled with desirable attributes and qualities based on personal preference' (p. 276), a model in which external and internal attributes are not necessarily the same anymore. With the results of the research done in the previous chapters still fresh in my mind, I am not convinced that such an optimistic end to this book is warranted.

Regarding the book as a whole, there are some points of criticism to be made. The structuring and order in which the chapters are presented seems more or less arbitrary and although the chapters clearly fall into the same research tradition and tackle similar issues, the overall line is, as with most edited volumes, hard to follow. Nevertheless, this is a very relevant and timely book, which clearly expresses the present way of thinking about gender and ICT within social studies of technology and which offers valuable insights into the more general relationship between stereotypes and its consequences for both policies and individual experiences.

## REFERENCE

- Håpnes, T. and K.H. Sørensen (1995) 'Competition and Collaboration in Male Shaping of Computing: A Study of a Norwegian Hacker Culture', pp. 174–91 in K. Grint and R. Gill (eds) *The Gender–Technology Relation*. London and Bristol: Taylor and Francis.

Els Rommes  
Nijmegen University