

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN HISTORY, LEGEND, AND MYTHOLOGY

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IT HAS GRADUALLY DAWNED on many men recently that the battle of the sexes has reached a revolutionary stage. As if we needed another revolutionary segment in our society, another member of the American household - the wife/mother - has taken up arms against the only household member not already in rebellion, namely, the husband/father.

WE ARE TOLD BY AN EFFETE CORPS of impudent newspaper columnists<sup>1</sup> that this is as it should be, that the American middle-aged male is guilty of

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<sup>1</sup>A quotation from a speech by Vice-President Spiro Agnew, given circa 1970, in one of the first of his criticisms of the media. The phrase became widely quoted during the early 70's.

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most of the social ills of our time. Variouslly referred to as the Establishment, the System, and sundry other epithets, he is considered to be responsible for everything from inflation to air pollution.

IT BEHOOVES EACH OF US to familiarize ourselves with the issues and tactics of what has come to be known as the Women's Liberation Movement. Lest you shrug off this development too hastily, let me inform you that the amount of literature already produced by the Women's Liberation front leaders is no mean accomplishment, and the degree to which they have been able to disrupt professional and scientific meetings may be a lesson to other revolutionary groups.

FAR FROM BEING AN ATTEMPT to present an exhaustive analysis of the Women's Liberation Movement, <sup>however,</sup> this paper is meant only to provide certain background information for such a study. History, legend, and even mythology give evidence of far more variety in female roles than we American males might suspect.

AMONG THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS of today's male/female roles is the Bible, perhaps as plain a statement of male superiority and dominance as is in existence. From the creation story to the post-crucifixion epistles of Paul the Apostle, men are the real chosen people, and women are the protected but dependent race.

ALL THE PROPHETS AND ALL THE APOSTLES were men; no book of the Bible is thought to have been written by a female. The spiritual giants and prime movers were all men. A role call of leading figures of the Bible - Moses, Abraham, David, Peter, Paul, etc., is a role call of male names. There is mention of women, of course, of the faithful and loving Ruth, a dedicated Esther, a pure and saintly Mary; all play important roles. But the great vessels of God's word and will were men, and in the statements of lineage and genealogy, only the names of men appear.

IN THE CREATION STORY God creates man: Adam. Then, seeing that man is lonely and with no appropriate mate, he creates woman - not from the dust as Adam had been formed, but from man, who (in an obvious reversal of biological fact) carried in his own body the prenatal material (in this case a rib) that was to become a person.

WOMAN'S STATUS IN BIBLICAL TIMES is well defined by the Mosaic Law which provided that a woman left defenseless in the world by her husband's death should be taken into the family of his brother who would become her husband. Without a male protector and guardian, no woman could be expected to cope with life and there was no thought of restructuring the social order in such a way that she could compete on an equal basis.

CENTURIES LATER THE Bachelor Apostle Paul was to write:

"Let the women keep silence in the church . . . and if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home: for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

I THINK IT IS FAIR TO CONCLUDE, therefore, that it is the Biblical position that woman inherently occupies a submissive status. Her role is assumed to be a part of her basic nature. You may be surprised to learn that the same may be said of the philosophy of Sigmund Freud, the Father of Psychoanalysis.

BASING HIS CONCLUSIONS on the data obtained from his own patients, a procession of middle-class neurotic European people living in the late stages of the Victorian Age, Freud conjectured that all women must contend with the most basic fact of their natures, namely, that they are incomplete human beings, lacking in their anatomical structure the most important symbol of status. This universal condition of the human female Freud called penis envy. To achieve a normal, well-adjusted life, Freud saw each woman as

having to come to terms with ~~their~~<sup>her</sup> own destiny, to work through the fantasies of castration and to give up her desire to possess, literally, a phallus. As a substitute she must marry herself to a man, thus gaining what she imagines herself to have been robbed of, and achieving, in Freud's scheme of things, the natural state of fulfillment for a woman.

BOTH THE FREUDIAN AND BIBLICAL VIEWS of woman are based on the premise that sex role is congenitally determined, a premise on which serious doubt has been cast by relatively recent anthropological studies.

AMONG THE BEST OF SUCH STUDIES are those by the noted anthropologist and sociologist, Margaret Mead, who in the 1930's, described several primitive New Guinea tribes, among whom she had lived, and whom she had studied over extended periods of time.

IN ONE STUDY Dr. Mead describes the mountain-dwelling tribe known as the Arapesh, in which the behaviors of men and women are very much alike. The similarity lies in the Arapesh male's passivity, gentleness, mildness, and domesticity, traits that we would describe as predominantly feminine. Men and women share the care of the children and other home duties with little division of labour.

THE MEN ARE CONSIDERED to be gentle, cooperative, and loving, much as the women. Men and women work together in their gardens and an Arapesh man cannot conceive of any normal person wanting to be a leader. The Arapesh baby is born into a warm and loving world in which both father and mother care for him and consider it a tragedy if he cries. They believe that both men and women are naturally cooperative and gentle and would think it odd that women and men should be expected to differ in personality.

ANOTHER TIME SHE DESCRIBES the river-dwelling people called the Mundugumors. Among members of this tribe, both sexes tend to be ruthless, aggressive, and violent. Mundugumor women continually fight with their

husbands and teach their sons at an early age to taunt their fathers with the names and epithets that are most irritating to them. The Mundugumor woman does not enjoy being a mother. She handles her children roughly and leaves them hanging on the wall in their cradle boards until their crying can no longer be endured. Both men and women in the Mundugumor culture are arrogant, violent, individualistic, possessing the sort of personality characteristics which, according to Dr. Mead, we would consider more masculine than feminine - which characterization may say much about what Dr. Mead thinks about American men.

IN A THIRD TRIBE which Dr. Mead describes, we find an even more dramatic contrast to our own cultural roles for men and women. Among the lake-dwelling Tchambuli the sexes do have dissimilar roles, as in our culture, but the pattern is largely reversed. The Tchambuli woman is the aggressive partner, the manager of business affairs. The man is emotionally responsive to the feelings of his children, and he is subordinate to and dependent upon his female mate. The Tchambuli are headhunters, but to them headhunting is a ceremonial obligation in which they take no great pleasure. Tchambuli men are artists. They enjoy painting, music, and drama. They spend much of their time in ornamenting themselves and playing parts in various rituals and dramas. The men gather in groups which change frequently, because as any Tchambuli native would tell you, men are sensitive creatures whose feelings are easily hurt and the gossip of the men's circles tends to create and magnify petty jealousies. Though they will organize a fishing party as an occasional lark, it is important only as a social event. The actual food getting, namely the hunting and serious fishing expeditions, are carried on by women. The women are tolerant of the men's amusements and enjoy seeing their husbands' latest artistic productions. Though the man nominally controls the family wealth, he must obtain his wife's consent if he wishes to purchase something.

SO COMPLETE IS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REVERSAL of sex roles among the Tchambuli that pregnancy and childbirth present interesting problems. Very little attention is paid to a pregnant Tchambuli woman, and when the time for delivery comes, she leaves the village, and, accompanied by a midwife, goes out into the wilderness to have her baby in relative isolation. At the same time, the Tchambuli man takes to the bed and is cared for by neighbors like any sick person. They bring him gifts to celebrate the blessed event, and after the birth of the baby the Tchambuli woman brings it into the home and places it under the man's care.

A STRONG CASE for the natural superiority of women is to be found in the various writings of the noted anthropologist, Ashley Montague. Professor Montague sees the natural superiority of women as having been hidden by a series of myths which have been formed largely around male and female relationships to the home.

DENYING THAT THE FEMALE is biologically more sedentary and that the male is inherently more active, mobile, and inventive, he states that most societies prescribe different attitudes and activities to men and women and that most of them try to rationalize these prescriptions in terms of physiological differences between the sexes or the different roles in reproduction. Such rationalizations, according to Montague, are myths, nurtured by the very circumstances to which they gave rise.

OF SPECIAL INTEREST is his theory documented by quotations from numerous scientific papers and ancient documents that men have always been jealous of women's ability to give birth to children, and that they have even been jealous of the female's ability to menstruate. It is this jealousy which has caused men to turn these capacities into disabilities, surrounding them with handicapping rituals and other taboos that in most cases amount to punishment.

AMONG THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES where menstruation is regarded as woman's method of getting rid of the evil humours that are supposed to accumulate in her body, there is an elaborate ritual involving a surgical procedure performed on each adolescent male youth. The operation consists of slitting open the urethra and inserting a stone to keep it permanently open. At certain ceremonies and initiations another incision is made to cause bleeding in this area, during which time such men are subject to much the same prohibitions as menstruating women. The flow of blood is considered to be a necessary cleansing process.

✓ MAN'S JEALOUSY OF THESE UNIQUE FEMALE FUNCTIONS (a curious reversal of Freud's idea of penis envy) is dramatically illustrated by an operation performed by certain North African regions where the female vulva is actually sewn up in such a manner as to leave only a small orifice for exudation purposes. After the girl becomes pregnant the organ is opened by incision shortly before childbirth, and after childbirth is sewn up again.

LEST ANYONE THINK that this kind of behavior occurs only among non-literate peoples and benighted heathens, Professor Montague offers the suggestion that today's surgeons are sedulously castrating thousands of women. For even though the ovaries are not removed, that, says Professor Montague, is what the operation of hysterectomy really is.

↓ EVEN THE CREATION STORY to which I referred earlier as evidence of male superiority is looked upon from an entirely different point of view by Professor Montague, who sees it as man's way of denying female superiority. His jealousy of woman's capacity to bear children is seen as the inspiration for the statement of Adam, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she is taken out of man."

MONTAGUE CHARGES THAT MEN accomplish their bluff of superiority over women by forcing their wills by one of two ways. They may either exercise muscular powers adequately or use a subtler way of browbeating, which is accomplished through the development of elaborate codes of chivalry and etiquette. Though these may have been and may continue to be much valued by some women, they were originally not intended as friendly acts. They represented the behavior of a patronizing superior who, in effect, was saying, "As your superior I am called upon to give you my support and make things easier for you. As long as you recognize that you are less capable than I, and as long as you remain submissive and dependent, I will continue to be polite to you." Chivalry becomes, thus, a kind of fictitious benevolence, a veneer covering selfishness, self-conceit, and contempt for the rights of women.

THE FEMALE, PROFESSOR MONTAGUE CONTENTS, is constitutionally stronger than the male, has greater stamina, and lives longer. <sup>We know that</sup> during pre-school and school age, females average slightly higher scores on intelligence tests than males, and there is some evidence to suggest that they average slightly lower scores after school age because girls must learn to hide their intellect out of deference to male egos. Other studies show that men tend to consider themselves to be of slightly higher intellect than their wives.

THE VERY OLD ARGUMENT that the average weight of a female brain is about four ounces less than that of a male brain may be discounted by the fact that there is no relation between brain size and intelligence. The biggest human brain on record was that of a mental retardate, while one of the smallest was that of the gifted French writer, Anatole France. Also, it is important to note that, in relation to total body size, the female brain is at least as large as, and in general larger, than that of the average male. No sex-linked differences in the microscopic structure of the brain have been found, and

the few chemical differences that have been discovered are not pertinent at this point since no one has the faintest idea of what the significance of these differences might be.

AMONG THE MOST INTERESTING biological facts concerning male and female differences are those which have to do with sex chromosomes. As you know, there are two kinds of sex chromosomes, generally called X and Y. The sperm cells carry X and Y chromosomes, but in the female ova there are only X chromosomes. This combination of chromosomes is decisive in determining whether an organism shall develop as a male or female. Up to the end of the sixth week of embryonic development the organism has no sex identifying characteristics. If the embryo is a genetic male, however, (having both X and Y chromosomes) then masculinizing substances begin to have their effect. If no masculinizing substance (presumably derived from the primitive gonad) is present, the infant will develop as a female. Thus, the distinguished endocrinologist, Dr. Alfred Hoet and others suggest that the basic surviving form is female, and that masculinity is something "additional." As one geneticist states, "The status of the female is never in doubt. Whoever produces eggs is essential for the future, for eggs are reproductive cells, whatever else they may be. Sperm are not so in the primary sense of the word," though they do serve secondary ends. First they serve to stimulate the otherwise comatose eggs to start developing - like the kiss that awakened the Sleeping Beauty (which is an interesting bit of symbolism) and, second, they serve to introduce considerable variability in human development.

ALL THIS IS REMINISCENT of the very interesting book by Phillip Wyley called The Disappearance. It is a kind of social science fiction about what would happen if one sex or the other disappeared from the earth. The book begins in this way: "On Saturday afternoon, August 12, 1951, the women disappeared." "The women" referred to all women of all races and nationalities,

as well as all primates (which at least settled one question so far as that book is concerned). The resulting stories of what the world might be like in either an all male or all female world are then told in alternating chapters.

THOUGH IN THE WOMEN'S WORLD biological scientists were able in a few years to synthesize materials that at least offered promise that human reproduction without male fertilization would soon be possible, the saddest part of the book was the touching reminiscences of the lonely men who forlornly counted the days of their isolation from wives and sweethearts and looked ahead to the unavoidable fate of the human race, knowing that in just a few years the last human being would have disappeared from the face of the earth for all eternity. |

BUT TO RETURN to the fascinating story of X and Y chromosomes, it is probable that the biological disadvantages accruing to the male are not so much due to what is in the Y chromosome as to what is not in it. This is illustrated by the large number of sex-linked diseases and physical abnormalities which result from an X chromosome, containing the recessive genes that carry such disorders, being paired with the Y chromosome, as the latter do not have any properties which are capable of suppressing the action of the recessive gene. Thus the male is likely to inherit such a disorder, while the female offspring would be blessed with another X chromosome which would compensate for, inhibit, or suppress the action of the disease-related X chromosome. Among the resulting physical defects which plague the male of the species are hemophilia, red-green color blindness, congenital cataracts, defective hair follicles, dwarfism, ichthyosis (which is having skin something like the scales of a fish), mental deficiency of several types, myopia, and the absence of central incisor teeth, plus some 25 other known congenital disorders.

STUDIES ON LONGEVITY offer further proof that X does not equal Y where sex is concerned. The greater longevity of the female obtains even if studies extend to prenatal deaths. Though between 120 and 150 males are conceived for every 100 females, the ratio of live births, at least among American whites, is approximately 106 males to 100 females. In India the sex ratio of boys to girls is 98.7 to 100, supporting the belief that the poorer the nutritional conditions, the greater the chance of death for males, suggesting that even the female fetus is stronger than the male fetus.

LIFE EXPECTANCY FOR WHITE FEMALES is some seven years longer than for white males, and for non-white females some five years longer than for non-white males. To eliminate the male contention that harder work and other privations may account for their higher mortality rates, one study published on longevity of Catholic nuns and monks who, for many years had been living much the same kinds of lives, showed the same sort of disparity in their mortality rates that is found in the general population. The nuns outlived the monks by some six years, in spite of the fact that their living conditions were much the same. Men like to believe that they are more stable emotionally and less vulnerable to stress than women, but a study performed in England during World War II indicated that women showed less emotionality in air raids, and were said to perform jobs with calmer deliberation than men. Studies of suicide rates show that in the United States about ten males commit suicide for every three females, and statistics reported by the World Health Organization show suicides on an international basis to be two to five times as common among men as among women. Women do make more suicide attempts than men, but the great majority of their attempts are unsuccessful. Mental health statistics show that boys far outnumber girls as school behavior problems and as referrals to mental health centers and related agencies, such as speech and hearing centers.

THE MYTH THAT WOMEN are more likely to fly into fits of temperment has been denied by controlled studies such as one in which the average male participant lost his temper six times to the average female participant's three. It is true that in the Nineteenth Century women frequently responded to shock by swooning, but the swooning served many functions which may suggest that it was a positive accomplishment of considerable value, a constructive use of emotion or simulated emotion which the poor male never understood. Weeping served much the same purpose both then and now. As a contemporary wit remarked, "A woman's idea of a good cry is one that secures the desired result."

WITH THESE PARADOXICAL findings from biblical and scientific literature in mind, let us look briefly at the historical development of the current Women's Liberation Movement.

THE FEMINIST ROBIN MORGAN summarized in a recent article the history of women's liberation starting with the formation of some short-lived organizations for working women in the 1820's. The first strike by women, in this case factory workers, is said to have taken place in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1824. In 1845 some factory workers on strike in Lowell, Massachusetts sang strike songs from which two lines went like this: "O isn't it a pity such a pretty girl as I should be sent into a factory to pine away and die." One would hope that their assembly line work was of a higher quality than their composing of lyrics.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN OF THE SOUTH during pre-Civil War days has been the subject of much romantic literature, but among present day women's liberationists the Southern Belle does not hold a high place. To quote from one, "Undoubtedly the feeling invested in this worship of white women owes its fervor and religious quality partly to the white men's guilty consciences over forceably taking their pleasure on their female slaves." Establishing a thread of unity with the black Civil Rights Movement, a liberationist writes

that the myth (relative to the Southern belle) serves an important social and political purpose by giving white men of all classes an object to protect against the imagined lust of the black man, at once reinforcing and justifying a vicious racism.

THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT is said to have had its official beginning in 1848 when several hundred women and sympathetic men met at Seneca Falls, New York, for a convention called by two active abolitionists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. In the social upheaval following the Civil War and reconstruction periods, women went to work in factories in greater and greater numbers. For the first time they entered government office jobs in large numbers and became a majority in the teaching profession. Prior to the Civil War the women's movement had drawn strength from the abolitionists movement and was closely associated with it, both spiritually and organizationally. During the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, women's groups concentrated their energies on the question of the franchise.

AS THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT CONCENTRATED MORE ON THE VOTE, it lost sight of the simple, forceful argument for equality based on the idea of natural rights as expounded by the Declaration of Independence. The number of working women grew from approximately four million in 1890 to almost seven and a half million in 1910. Few American suffrage leaders recognized the obvious link between women's rights and unionism, but in Britain leaders recognized the common issues and embraced them. Thus, the early labor unions in England included many working class women, whereas American women's suffrage groups tended to remain in the hands of well-to-do ladies of leisure and social reformers. In 1913 sufferagettes began holding vigils at the White House, picketing, going on hunger strikes, and frequently being jailed.

At one point when five thousand women marched into Washington, D.C., an angry mob attacked them and a National Guard regiment was called out to protect the women. By 1918 the Fifteenth Amendment had guaranteed women the right to vote. The feminist movement had accomplished women's suffrage, as well as women's right to get an education and to own property.

SOMEWHAT DISILLUSIONED WITH THEIR EFFORTS toward the emancipation of women, modern women liberationists see the sufferagettes' efforts as having added to their burden. They draw a fine distinction, therefore, between emancipation and liberation. To quote from an article by liberationists Connie Brown and Jane Sytes, "Liberation would obviously dispense with the cruel dichotomy of sex and virtue, but instead after emancipation the roles were maintained, even combined. Now woman must, to hold her man, act both the prostitute and the homebody mistress and mother. The image of this good-bad woman has varied over the years from flapper to the Playboy bunny, who looks like the girl next door, or the housewife sex kitten of the TV commercials. A good girl whose grandmother would have refused to kiss her fiance until the engagement was sealed now has to decide how far to go on each date to keep her reputation poised between prudish and loose. The decision has to be based on the need to keep a man's respect while maintaining his sexual interest; her own needs and feelings must come second. Our pleasure and our womanhood are still defined by what men want from us." It is with this background, therefore, that the Women's Liberation Movement has embarked on its great task. Let us hope that we will not awaken some morning to find that the hand that rocked the cradle has become the hand that cradles the rock!