

BOOK REVIEWS

S. Ardener (Ed.): Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society. London: Croom Helm in association with the Oxford University Women's Studies Committee. 1978. 227 pp. £3.95.

There is no lack of theory on women. They are more animal than men; they are less animal. Their sexuality threatens the social structure; they are so much in control of their own sexuality that they are morally responsible in this domain as no man can ever be. They are essentially caring mothers; they are merely the field in which the male sows his seed, providing 'nidus and nourishment' for the foetus. They are puzzling creatures.

Not all these theories are, of course, held simultaneously in any one culture; but there does seem to be widespread agreement in one area. Women are either dangerous and polluting, or vulnerable and easily polluted, or both. Therefore they must be fenced in, shut off, either for their own protection or for that of society at large.

Society at large is, naturally, male. Women, as Dorothy Sayers pointed out 35 years ago, are not quite human: they constitute what nowadays is called a 'marked' category. The physical and moral boundaries set around women serve, among other things, to mark the category; and the same boundaries become (to the spokesmen for society at large) symbols of boundedness in general: a garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse. The social segregation of women reinforces their symbolic usefulness already so aptly 'given' in their physiology. In that sense, women are quite as 'good to think with' as animal species. Male/female joins right/left in the bricoleur's tool-kit.

There are other markers. In nearly all societies, styles of dress and bodily adornment reinforce secondary sexual differences in appearance: it seems that 'unisex' clothing, even as an unrealized ideology, is an important cultural innovation. Then there is work. While most kinds of work are done by men in some societies and by women in certain others, men's occupations are quite universally seen as demanding, interesting, challenging and essential, and women's as easy, dull, monotonous and trivial. Indeed, triviality itself, as Shirley Ardener, Renée Hirschon, Caroline Humphrey and Judith Okely all point out in this book, is essential as a marker of occupations as 'female'; and related to the triviality of feminine 'busywork' is the whole cluster of phenomena first subsumed by Edwin Ardener under the term 'mutedness'.

New in a very few societies the females have taken, quite publicly and shamelessly, to defining themselves. Whether their definitions have any more objective merit than those produced by the men, cannot satisfactorily be decided: this is not a discussion in which anyone can pretend to be neutral. The discussion itself, then, has the very considerable merit of deflating - and one hopes discrediting forever - the illusion of a 'value-free' social science. At any rate the long-muted voices of women may serve as a corrective to the roar of uncontradicted male waffle down the centuries. And if some of the voices are a little shrill, this may be only from long disuse; as some of the male voices may be held to have become hoarse from too much talking.

Not that the voices heard in this book are shrill. Far from it. Indeed, the voices are not even exclusively female. Graham Ratcliff with Freda Newcombe contributes a neuropsychological account, based on recent experimental tests, of sex differences in the use of language and in spatial ability. Girls, it seems, are better at language; boys are better at space. But in the last resort, Newcombe and Ratcliff tell us, we do not know much about actual morphological differences between the brains of people assigned to different categories; and in the absence of such hard knowledge, speculation and argument continue to flourish unchecked.

Kirsten Hastrup's article on the concept of virginity explores the use, by a male-oriented society, of women as social symbols. But women themselves, she finds, use their own bodies as symbols for 'self-identification'; this is not 'unbearable in itself, as long as it is the women who define the premisses'. The reader is brought up short. That single, emotionally-loaded word 'unbearable' at once calls an undesirable sort of attention to her whole semantic argument. Symbols and meanings are not in themselves bearable or unbearable: they simply are. It seems a pity to supply the opponents of self-definition with such easy ammunition.

In Zululand, a self-defined virginity is the pride of a group of young maidens; in India, on the other hand, a girl's virginity at marriage is the anxious concern of the caste group. This is because its purity depends on that of its women, through whom caste membership is transmitted. The theme of women as transmitting vessels runs through a number of the other articles. Judith Okely quotes Helen Callaway as saying that political power, like haemophilia, can be transmitted through females but is only manifest in males. Exactly the same, it would seem, is true of family name in Renée Hirschon's Piraeus Greek community; and, of course, of membership in patrilineal social groups anywhere. It is these transmitting females that are the "interstitial wives" of patrilineal theory; they need not even, as Wendy James points out, appear on the anthropologist's genealogical diagrams. And it is precisely their ambiguous 'there-and-not-there' position that invests them with a quite different sort of power - the sort enjoyed by the novelist Isak Dinesen's aristocratic Danish ladies, 'dignified and debonair caryatids' propping up their lords' houses and carrying 'the future of the name in their lap... Their Lords might rule the country, and allow themselves many liberties, but when it came to that supreme matter of legitimacy which was the vital principle of their world, the centre of gravitation lay with them.'

Less poetically, women as wives and daughters-in-law are, from the point of view of a patrilineal structure, necessary evils; and, like all necessary evils, they have a concealed power of a thoroughly dangerous sort. The restraints their menfolk find it necessary to put upon that power are explicitly spelt out among Caroline Humphrey's Mongols and Renée Hirschon's Greeks; the same restraints are present in a much more covert and, to me, more uncomfortable manner at the boarding-school once attended by Judith Okely and described by her in a totally fascinating piece of 'personal anthropology'. The future wives and mothers at an English 'girls' public school' of the 50s are not told explicitly, as their Greek sisters are, what is expected of them: premarital chastity, marital fidelity and fruitfulness are not so much as mentioned. Presumably these values are

somehow to be absorbed by osmosis from the public school ethos so thickly diffused throughout the atmosphere. It is only when sex rears its ugly head (in the form of literature from an Elvis Presley fan club) that the senior mistress explodes: 'You are fit only to dance at the Hammersmith Palais!'

Okely rightly points out that Elvis Presley was not only 'sexually insinuating'; more importantly, he was 'part of that proletarian culture from which we were to be protected.' For what these girls were supposed to transmit (along with their future husbands' surnames - their own were never mentioned) was, essentially, membership in a social class. To that end their movement was restricted, their deportment rigidly supervised, and their accent honed and polished to serve as 'a sign and a weapon'. Academic achievement was far less important than the development of a proper class consciousness. At about the same period, middle-class girls in South America were discouraged from academic ambitions on the quite explicit grounds that university was for boys. The senior mistress who had so objected to Elvis Presley puts it somewhat differently:

She declared I would be "selfish to go to University..." thereby depriving a worthier person of a place.

Judith Okely and her fellow-pupils were never meant to compete in a men's world: they were being groomed for marriage within an élite whose biological and social reproduction they were to ensure.

Yet their situation within that élite seems to have had an extra dimension of ambiguity, one that is absent from the lives of, say, Renée Hirschon's Greek women. It is an ambiguity concerning gender. Greek (or Mongol or Indian) girls are at least spared confusion about being female; indeed Greek girls are even presented with an explicit model for all the specified and unspecified feminine virtues: the Virgin Mary. The girls at Judith Okely's school, by contrast, had only male models proposed for their admiration and emulation: Mr. Baldwin, Field-Marshal Haig, Scott of the Antarctic, Livingstone, Cecil Rhodes, Shakespeare - by definition non-imitable models. Traditional feminine accomplishments such as ballet-dancing were rare, expensive 'extras' added to the curriculum; whereas team-games were not only free (in the sense of there being no extra charge to parents) but compulsory. The games were, naturally, surrogate boys' games, calling indeed for 'unfeminine' speed and aggression, but less speed and aggression than was expected of boys. In an English boarding school just as much as among the Tewa Indians, a girl was an incomplete boy. One feels that the physically restricted Mediterranean and Muslim women have, in some psychological ways, an easier time of it.

The unpolluted transmission of status, the fenced-off field sown with legitimate seed - can it really be necessary for men to think of women in these terms? Refreshingly, Wendy James suggests that it is not; and, moreover, that some peoples of sub-Saharan Africa take a less restrictive view of woman's place in society than do some of their ethnographers. Here, the biological and social function of women as mothers is more than just recognized: it is highlighted and overtly honoured, transformed into a 'logically central' and 'qualitatively positive' role. This focussing on motherhood is not confined to jurally

matrilineal societies: it pervades the moral culture of a vast area, so that 'to classify a society by the single criterion of its dominant jural principle, and then mark it off from others on the map, may not be the best way of making comparisons.' Such facile comparisons, based on the mere juxtaposition of genealogical diagrams, leave out most of the important elements concerning attitudes toward women and motherhood; they are likely to represent not so much the values of the society under study as the view of the 'patrifocal' anthropologist.

But then, the literary cultures of the world have, historically, been largely patrifocal, and remain so. An English male gynaecologist could write in the 1970s:

The traits that compose the core of the female personality are feminine narcissism, masochism and passivity.

And similarly, ethologists and biosociologists have, in recent years, made of their disciplines a reasonably sophisticated academic 'charter myth' for an ideology of male dominance. Hilary Callan, here seen in the second round of her doughty battle with 'ethologism', is particularly good on this. She punctures the romanticism of the ethologists' sexual vocabulary - all those overlords and pashas and harems, the cohorts of males, assemblies of females and clusters of juveniles. She is serenely unworried about the 'possibility of there being a biological infrastructure to certain human relationships': what she is after, very rightly, is to expose genuine weaknesses in concept and assumption, such as the unformulated idea that (empirical) variation always and necessarily predicts (innate) variability. In the end, she finds herself back at what she herself perceives as the unfashionable nature/culture controversy:

'Nature' is not related to 'culture' solely as cause to effect, whether weakly or strongly... It may be... that what 'nature' provides at one level in the form of mere predispositions and outlines, 'culture' at another perversely exaggerates and hardens, transforming distributions into categories by the force of its own (evolved?) thirst for classification. The regularities of sexual differentiation in society... may, despite their apparent reality, reflect 'programmes' at many levels from the neuro-endocrinal to the theological. 'Programmes' thus regarded may cancel each other out in some places, summate in others, and are unpredictably subject to the modifying power of human cognition.

This is a quite different level of theorizing from most that has been heard so far, and a far more profitable one for the future of the debate.

Eva Gillies.

M. Chapman: The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture. London: Croom Helm. 1978. 253 pp. £8.50.

Think of Scotland and one thinks of the Highlands; Highland culture seems somehow definitive of a more general national aspect. The examination of why this is so forms the basis of Malcolm Chapman's book. The work is an admirable and, within its own terms, wholly successful attempt to explain the paradox whereby the image of Scotland has been associated with the image of the Highlands.

It is by placing these images in an historical and literary context that Chapman succeeds so well in answering the question, 'Where did the Gaelic world of our imagination have its origin?' (p.232). The book concerns itself mainly with the literary impetus behind the historical adoption of the several myths of the Highlander, and with the location of these myths within the perspective of a general Scottish identity.

Past attempts to understand the 'Celtic' or 'Highland' attributes within a broader panorama have used some form of duality to typify what were taken to be the opposing characteristics of Lowlander/Anglo-Saxon/Teuton and Highlander/Celt or Gael. Dichotomies between urban and rural, sense and sensibility, or society and community, for example, lead us only to an approximate and general understanding of the characteristics of the Gaelic or Highland position within Scottish culture, and, as Chapman shows, condemn us in the end to a formless relativism in which one pole is defined simply as possessing what the other does not. The Ossianic controversy, for example, created concern about the 'true' elements of Gaeldom; while recognising these writings to be essentially false, Matthew Arnold still considered them to have a certain 'residue of the very soul of the Celtic genius' (p.51), thus distinguishing them from more anglicised writings.

The Celt, it was argued, was possessed of sentimentality and sensibility bordering on a kind of all-pervading cultural 'femininity'. Such qualities were antithetical to those thought to be found in the Anglo-Saxon, whose straight-forwardness of deed and thought set him off from the romantic Highland figure. At the same time, it was argued that the retention of such 'feminine' traits (and indeed the Gaelic language itself) somehow condemned the Gael to a position of inferior social status. The Scottish Review, in 1882, maintained:

The habit of mind promoted by Gaelic influences is an ideal treatment of the physical world, and a promotion of the sentimental and poetic side of existence to a more prominent position than the modern work-a-day world is willing to put up with (p.102).

The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture shows us how these ideas and contrasts arose, and how the identities of Highlander and Gael evolved within the cultural history of Scotland.

Historical Highland Scotland and historical Gaelic Scotland were not, and are not today, necessarily the same. Chapman distinguishes them by separating the issue of historical Highland identity from consideration of the fortunes of the Gaelic language within that identity and from the attempt to establish Gaelic as Scotland's national language. Some aspects of this latter controversy do have bearing upon the dominant theme of

the book, but Chapman wisely avoids clouding his main arguments with such debates.

When considering the place of Ernest Renan in the debate about Celt and Saxon as literary or cultural types, Chapman notes how relevant the imageries of Renan's childhood may have been in establishing his stereotype of the Celt (and for our purposes, the Scottish Gael) as almost child-like in intellect and economic power, by contrast to the paternalising and imperialising British cultural 'norm'. In Chapter 4, he discusses clearly and concisely the several points raised by the equation of the Celt with these child-like qualities. He shows that Matthew Arnold's argument for the maintenance of the Celtic literary tradition within a more general English cultural heritage tended to ignore the actual place of the Celtic languages. This paradox is, in fact, a fairly common occurrence in the 'Celtic Twilight' movement. In the aims of their political revivalism and in their fostering of the literature, the intellectuals largely ignored the situation of the language among the native speakers.

A great deal of what this book shows concerning a particularly literary perspective is substantiated in the shifting debates about Gaelic and Highland history. The question of the role-suitability of Gaelic within certain 'modern' language situations - in scientific or business use - is, as Chapman shows, implicit in the controversy over its literary revival and is in part responsible for the creation of an imagery around the Gaelic and the Highland that associates the two with the rural both geographically and socially.

In Chapter 5, Folklore and Folklorists, Chapman examines the premises behind the application of the externally-derived concepts of a scientific folklore. He shows that, in considerations of the Gael and his culture, there is a curious investment of Gaeldom as Folkdom par excellence. Gaeldom exists as a sort of 'ideal' type.

The spatial distribution of the Gaidhealtachd (the Gaelic-speaking area) is changing as Gaelic-speakers move to the urban belts of central Scotland. The Highlands, then, are no longer coterminous with the Gaelic-speaking areas, and the book emphasizes how the Gaidhealtachd and the Highlands are politically and culturally estranged both from each other and from the external bases of power over them. Rejection of inherent cultural traits and the adoption of outside ways under the influence of externally-oriented mass media are just as responsible today for the creation of this false imagery as were the literary factors evident in such writers as Renan and Arnold. We must understand this change of imagery and remember too that in each epoch competing images will arise. The example Chapman uses is the image put out by the Highlands and Islands Development Board which is in direct contrast with that created in the writings of Lillian Beckwith; as he asks, how can we decide which is the 'correct' one?

In his concluding comments, the author offers many salient points on Highland Scotland and Gaelic society and on the place of the two in a future Scotland. He argues that 'rustic populism' as a framework for the preservation of the two will condemn the language in particular, and the culture in general, to a lingering death. This is a valid point, and again one that finds historical

expression in the context of late nineteenth century pan-Celtic revivalism.

Chapman asks whether to return '...to an early medieval Scotland where Gaelic was the language of learning and where displaced and rustic older tongues were jeered into silence' (p.224), would be of any help to the searcher after the 'undisturbed Highland world'. In the sense of providing a contextual historical framework with which to understand the rise and decline of the Gaelic language, the difference between the formal Gaidhealtachd and the Highlands, and the creation of the imagery around both, such a return would undoubtedly be of value. The book, however, does not concern itself with tracing these problems in their entirety. What it does do is provide an understanding of the problems themselves and the background to both the problems and our views of them. In coming to terms with the myths and historicisms behind the creation of the Gaelic and Highland imagery within a Scottish context, Chapman goes as near as anyone has done, and a good deal further than most, towards revealing where the Gaelic world of our imagination had its origin. In showing us, in various ways, how we are to understand this Gaelic world in a wider context, he deserves warm praise from those connected with Scottish and Gaelic studies.

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