

The Womanly Image, Character Assassination Through the Ages

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I had a job interview several weeks ago. Friends warned me not to be too aggressive. During the interview, I tried to present myself as a competent candidate, able to “think like a man” and yet not to be a “masculine” female. After fielding several questions relevant to the job, I suddenly heard, “Miss Stern, are you in love?”

Do you think they asked my competition - seven men - the same question? No, for a cultful of reasons. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was quoted once as saying, “There are two kinds of women, those who want power in the world and those who want power in bed.” And the majority seem to agree with Jackie that the latter is socially more acceptable. That’s how many women in America have been taught to think. And that’s how many men think women ought to think.

Children are taught sexual stereotypes early, as well as the appropriate behavior for sex-determined role in life. Asking a little boy, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” implies to him unlimited possibilities in his future. But most often we ask a little girl, “Where did you get that pretty dress?” suggesting she has only one real option open to her. If we do ask her what she wants to be, she’s likely to give the conditioned female response - “A mother.” Why? So she can replace her dolls with real babies.

The inspiration for teaching girls to expect less than boys come from a range of cultural sources, religious, literary, psychiatric and pop. Even in the Bible, exceptional, independent women like Rebecca, Sarah, Deborah, or Ruth are practically unknown with infamous Eve or Delilah.

Eve was made from one of Adam’s spare parts, almost as an afterthought, to help him on earth: “And the Lord God said: ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help-meet for him.’”

There is a contrary legend of the first female, Lilith, who was created equal to man.

When the Lord created the world and the first man, he saw that man was alone, and quickly created a woman for him, made like him from the earth, and her name was Lilith. Right away, they began to quarrel. He would say “You sleep on the bottom,” and she would say “No, you sleep on the bottom, since we are equals and both formed from the earth...” When Lilith saw what the situation was, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and disappeared into thin air.

But Eve, not Lilith, is the prototypical woman - man’s little helper, and his temptress. Today the heirs to the Bible in America - Jews and Christians - have formalized biblical biases in laws and ceremonies and thereby elevated folklore to religious truths. Among the Orthodox Jews, for example, discrimination against women is so blatant that they are forced to sit segregated behind a curtain or in a balcony. The rationale is that women will distract men from their prayers. It is no wonder that men thank God every morning in their ritual prayer “that Thou hast not made me a woman.”

The majority of Jews have modified most traditional formalities, but independent female expression is still discouraged if outside the confines of the home or not channeled through husband and children.

A Jewish wife is less subservient to her husband than a gentile wife; so say comparative studies on the subject. That's somewhat understandable since Christianity owes much to a prominent classical heritage, that held the second sex in even lower esteem. Utopia for the male chauvinist is Demosthenes' description of Hellenic male-female arrangements: "We have hetairae for the pleasure of the spirit, concubines for sensual pleasure, and wives to bear our sons."

Aristotle's definition of femininity was "a certain lack of qualities: we should regard the female nature as afflicted with natural defectiveness." And his disciple Saint Thomas Aquinas echoed him religiously "...a female is something deficient and by chance."

Contempt for women helps explain why they can't become Catholic priests, and why theologians, religious education courses and Catholic marriage manuals highlight the supposedly inferior and passive qualities of women, who "naturally" subordinate themselves to men.

Traditional Protestant marriage services also perpetuate the attitude that the female is a second class human being. Like a piece of property, the bride is "given" by her father to the groom, whom she promises to "obey." (Although formally removed from the liturgy, this vow still persists in the popular image of the wedding ceremony.) The clergyman reminds her of her proper place when he says, "I pronounce that they are man and wife." Not husband and wife. Not man and woman. The man keeps his status, while she takes on a new one. Her identity vanishes when she sheds her maiden name for his identification. (Blackstone's *Commentaries* on the law strips a married woman of her rights altogether as she legally dies on her wedding day and becomes "incorporated and consolidate with her husband." Accordingly, "A man cannot grant anything to his wife for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence."

Although reputedly "progressing" beyond the attitudes of antiquity and the Middle Ages, our enlightened European ancestors continued furnishing us some not too enlightened guidelines of a woman's place - or lack of it - in the world.

High school English students learn from Shakespeare that "Frailty, thy name is woman." Rousseau's contributions to the idea of man's equality and natural goodness makes one exception: "Woman was made to yield to man and put up with his injustice."

Samuel Johnson's word to the wise woman is that "a man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek." Honore de Balzac adds, "A woman who is guided by the head and not the heart is a social pestilence: she has all the defects of a passionate and affectionate woman with none of the compensations: she is without pity, without love, without virtue, without sex."

When in 1776 in America, Abigail Adams asked her husband, John Adams to "be more generous and favorable to them [women] than your ancestors" and to see to it that the new government not "put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands," John reportedly chuckled. The Continental Congress ignored her. Two hundred years later Spiro Agnew said:

“three things have been difficult to tame - the ocean, fools, and women. We may soon be able to tame the ocean; fools and women will take a little longer.”

The myths of marriage counselor G. C. Payetter (from his book *How To Get and Hold a Woman*) have been praised by a number of psychiatrists, and he is consulted in earnest by troubled people. Payetter counsels:

Feelings, moods and attitude...rule a woman, not facts, reason, nor logic.
By herself woman is all mixed-up but superb as an auxiliary (Genesis: helper.)
Woman is inanimate or on the defensive until you create a feeling such as praise.
Then she goes all out.
Never scold or explain when she is angry, remember she is feeling not thinking...
Stop bossing, just manipulate her in her feelings...
The acquisition of knowledge or responsibilities does not lessen women's need for support, guidance, and control. Quite the contrary.
Why ask women when they only need to be told? Why ask women when they hope to be taken?

America's twentieth-century gospel is the work of Freud. Although Freud supposedly has altered the entire course of Western intellectual history, many of his ideas about women are simply male chauvinism. Letters he wrote his fiancée reveal that he, too, wanted his woman kept relatively docile and ignorant so she couldn't compete with him.

His theories have given scientific status to prejudice. The Freudians - psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers, marriage counselors, pastoral counselors, educators, writers, literary critics, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, criminologists, and just plain subway psychiatrists in the newspapers, magazines, and on TV - all subscribe to the belief that “anatomy is destiny.” In other words, biological differences between the sexes determine personality differences; standards of mental health depend on the sex of the sick.

How? Dr. Judd Marmor, clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, has summarized Freud's views on feminine psychology:

The most significant of the biological factors...is the lack of the penis, which inevitable leads to “penis envy” in the woman. Freud considered penis envy to be a dominant theme in all feminine life, and one that inevitably causes women to feel inferior to men. These deep seated feelings of inadequacy can be compensated for only partially by giving birth to a male child...

Masochism and passivity...are natural aspects of normal femininity and whenever a woman behaves in non-passive or aggressive ways or competes with men, she is being neurotically unfeminine...

The most complicated sequence of personality development that women are subject to...leads inevitably...to less adequate superego formation than in men. This presumably is reflected in women having a poorer sense of justice and weaker social interests than men have.

Any resemblance between women and pet dogs or mute concubines is purely coincidental. No doubt, Payetter's model woman is the runner-up to this year's Miss America, who said women shouldn't try to run things "because they are more emotional and men can overcome their emotions with logic."

Even more objectionable are psychiatrist-authors who pronounce final judgement on the mental health of thousands of women reading books like *The Power of Sexual Surrender*. Featured in the book, which has had at least ten paperback printings and has been excerpted in *Pageant* magazine, is "The Masculine Woman." (Doctor, how can a woman be a female and be masculine simultaneously?) She's "frigid" - "a driving, competitive woman who was very successful in the business world, having graduated from a leading women's college." "Clear thinking and logical mind, her emotionless almost masculine forthrightness in expressing herself belied her softly feminine appearance." Surrendering to her "real nature," the doctor's cure, is the only way she can be mentally healthy. Then miraculously

...those details of life that once seemed so difficult become simple. And because they are feminine tasks, household work, planning and getting dinners, keeping the children busy or in line - whatever life demands - soon lose their irksome and irritating quality and become easy, even joyful...At this juncture, or closely following on it, a woman begins to feel her full power, the power that comes to her for her surrender to her destiny.

The spuriously Freudian vision of a truly "feminine" female serves the purposes of admen who woo women to spend millions on clothes and cosmetics in vain pursuit of their "real nature." To sell a new product, industry need only simultaneously make the product and manufacture anxiety in gals, pressing them to consume or be consumed in a female identity crisis. For example, featured in every women's magazine, including those for teen-agers, are the latest advertising campaigns for vaginal deodorants, a "female necessity." One called Cupid's Quiver comes in four flavors - Orange Blossom, Raspberry, Champagne, or Jasmine. Madison Avenue courts the female, even seducing minors. Teenform, Inc., manufactures of bras for teen-agers, estimates that nine-year-olds spend \$8 million on bras annually.

Ingenue magazine pushes teen-agers into adult posturing. The format is peppered with advertisements for engagement rings, pictures of desirable adolescent boys, and occasionally a plan of attack such as dinners for two. The ads for cosmetics and clothes are practically identical to those for their mothers. Typical of women's magazines, *Ingenue* includes at least one psychologically centered article. Recently, it explained in "The Hardest Thing About Growing Up" that "inevitably, relationships with boys affect relationships with girls." It condoned that statement, "I don't trust girls in the same way anymore. They become rivals." This is how girls learn the platitudes: women can't work with other women when men are around, and never work for a woman.

If a girl manages to survive *Ingenue* without succumbing to marriage. *Glamour* picks up her. ("How Five Groovy Men Would Make You Over Into Their Dream Girls") Where the boys are is where it's at for the reader who is shunted from high school to college to career to

marriage to motherhood - "Find Your New Look. College Into Career Make-over. Job Into Mother Make-over."

The lucky gal who's made the grade by landing a man is promoted to Modern Bride, which induces her to buy "utterly feminine" wedding gowns, bride-and-groom matching wedding rings, silver, china, furniture, ad nauseum. The wedding itself is big business; Wediquette International, Inc., offers total planning - the place, time, invitations, gown, caterers, florist photographer...

Ah, then conjugal bliss - and of course a magazine for mothers. *Redbook* boasts its biggest year because it knows "Young Mamas Spend More Than Big Daddies" and so talks "to that 18-34 year old the way she wants to be talked to," which means in baby talk or kitchen chatter.

McCall's claims 16 million matrons who "buy more than the readers of any other women's service magazine." Its reader "buys more cosmetics and toiletries, more prepared foods, owns more life insurance, more automobiles..."

Although *Cosmopolitan* says its reader is the career woman who desires success in her own right, it is pitched to the gal who missed the marriage boat the first time around. Female passivity is still the accepted mode of behavior. She can be assertive in the office, but when man-hunting after five, she must be seductively submissive. Who knows? She might hook a divorced man or married man looking for an affair.

Cosmo repeats an old tip from Jackie and Delilah - sex is a woman's hidden arsenal. Under a pseudonym, "a well-known American gynecologist" instructs readers "How to Love Like a Real Woman." "If your man bawls at you and you know you are in the right, what should you do?" "You should take your clothes off. Sex is a woman's strongest weapon. It is her proper weapon."

Taking a cue from *The Power of Sexual Surrender*, the expert explains, "Women must give and give and give again because it is their one and only way to obtain happiness for themselves." Furthermore, "To argue is a male activity. To fight is a male activity. I say to women: 'Don't become a man in skirts. Don't fight. Don't argue...'" Any female who would practice this advice must be masochistic - typical of a "normal" female, according to Freudian thought.

A popular misconception is that in time education will erase all the ill effects of thinking in stereotypes. But the educational system takes over where cultural myths, Freudian folklore, and the media leave off in depressing a girl's aspirations and motivations. All along, she's taught to accept a double standard for success and self-esteem: It's marriage and motherhood for girls, while it's education and career for boys. She's pushed to be popular, date and marry young (more than half of all American women are married before the age of twenty-one.) Success in school only inhibits her social life. Intellectual striving, a necessity for academic success, is considered competitively aggressive; that is unnatural and unladylike behavior, since the essence of femininity, she has learned, is repressing aggressiveness. Telling her she thinks like a man is a backhanded compliment, which is discouraging if she has tried to be a woman using her brains, not sex, in the classroom and office.

While girls outperform boys intellectually in prepuberty, attrition in IQ sets in during adolescence when they learn from new, extracurricular lessons that looks, not brains, are what

counts. After high school, achievement in terms of productivity and accomplishment drops off even more. More than 75 percent (some say as high as 95 percent) of all qualified high-schoolers not entering college are girls. Those who go attend more for husband-hunting than for educational self-advancement; one study at a Midwestern university revealed 70 percent of the freshman women were there for an MRS. Women BA's are less than half as likely to try for a graduate degree as equally qualified men.

Women should not be given an even break in education and careers, says a cliched argument, because they will get married and quit anyway. But that's because they are given an arbitrary, unfair option which men aren't forced to accept - either career or marriage. Career opportunities and salary levels for women are so poor that a calculating female would figure marriage is a better bargain. Once married, she can stop fighting the stereotypes and start teaching them to her children.