

The Fear of Women

In the early 1980s I took the class “Women and Violence” at Cal State Hayward. We read a number of feminist publications and essays, including Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunach* and Andrea Dworkin’s *Woman Hating*. One of the underlying themes that began to obsess me was the fear of women, which was a theme I had explored while studying Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter” during Professor Cynthia Katona’s literature class. While researching this paper I came upon a book by Wolfgang Lederer, M.D., with the same title I had given my essay. In fact, when I looked at his bibliography I had read a number of the same publications.

I don’t remember the exact assignment that fostered this paper, but I do remember that we had to present it to our classmates. After my presentation, the professor praised my work and also told me that I would be a good teacher because of my ability to communicate abstract ideas. I sent a copy to Professor Katona telling her about my presentation.

In 2015, Cynthia found this essay in her files and returned it to me. Unfortunately, the bibliography page is missing. I have cleaned up some typos and refined some sentences. I also felt I had to add a reference to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid Tale*, which was still a few years away from being published.

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In the beginning was the Great Earth Mother, the embodiment of nature, the goddess of fertility, the symbol of human immortality. She was the life, the light and the symbolic body of the Earth. As she was the natural food source for her children, she became the goddess of grain for her people. In Greek mythology she was known as Demeter, the goddess of corn. It was to her that grateful prayers were given, for it was from her “whom had come this best and most necessary gift of human life.” From woman and her relationship with nature came nourishment, and in the minds of early man, magic. “Womanpower and magic control over nature were closely inter-connected in the mind of early man. Is it any wonder, then, that the earliest objects of worship uncovered by archeological research were naked female forms, small figurines with great thighs, big breasts and large bellies?”



This image of woman is best represented in the statue of Venus Von Willendorf, which is dated about 30,000 b.c.e. She represents, according to Wolfgang Lederer, M.D., that of an underlying ritual idea which sees woman as the embodiment of the beginning and continuance of life. “Of all the statues I had ever seen, she seemed the most able to stand by herself—be it in a forest, or a desert, or amid the swirl of humanity;

unperturbed, uninvolved. She needed no face; for whatever in this world is important and worth while seemed to lie not roundabout her, but within.” Thus she symbolizes early man’s adoration of woman as the mysterious bringers of life.

Because woman is the body through which new life is born, man has invariably revered and feared her biological functions. “In remote times, the mysterious menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and the birth of new life out of woman’s body made a profound impression on the masculine mind, greatly enhanced by the fact that pregnancy and the sexual act were not understood to be connected. Apparently, man had no part in the creation of new life. It was female magic and the reincarnation of the ancestral spirit that thrust new life into the woman’s womb, not man’s semen. Even in the advanced civilization of early Minoan Crete, where divinity was worshipped in the shape of sacred motherhood—the heavy-buttocked clay figurines prefiguring the forthcoming Great Goddess were usually in a state of advanced pregnancy—the biological role of the father does not seem to be fully understood.”

Because of man’s lack of knowledge about his biological function in the procreative process and also because of his role as hunter and warrior, his abstraction and absence from domestic life left woman in control of the nurturing of children, the gathering and growing of herbs, fruits, roots, berries and grains; and thus the social organization of the group. Therefore, man’s supplication was to woman and her procreative powers, and thus it was reflected in their art. However, “prehistoric man

worshipped the little goddesses, but probably more in superstitious fear than in adoration.”

If the birth of a child by a woman is seen by man as an act of reproducing oneself, an act of immortality, and man, knowingly, cannot reproduce life from within in his own body, what does he create?

AND then there was fear.

The fear of woman was not a culturally exclusive phenomenon in the minds of early man, nor has this fear, with the advent of scientific knowledge, lost its power to serve **“as one, if not as the essential driving forces in the setting up of cultural values.”** As the Great Earth Mother, woman was “the protectress, the good mother, who feeds man with fruits and tubers and grains, but also poisons him and lets him hunger and thirst in times of drought when she withdraws from living things.” She is the bringer of hunger, of darkness, of disease, of death. It is this association with death and evil which seems to give rise to a variety of mythological stories which reveal a shifting from sexual immortality which worships woman to individual mortality which despises woman.

The most obvious examples of this change in thought occur in Greece with Pandora and in the Middle East in the Garden of Eden with Eve. No longer are these two women of the all-living Mother but creatures born by the powers of the God(s). These new females bring to the earth of man (for in both myths only men populated the world) sex and death.

Mortality is the punishment, a consequence of both myths, as it is in the

myths of the Blackfoot and Dene in North America, of the Eskimo and Mexican, and of the Wamyamwezi of Southeast Africa “who believe that men would have been immortal but for the first woman who introduced death into the world.”

Is it any wonder, then, that a vast body of mythological stories should arise that reflect man’s fears of impotence, castration, feminization, and death? These myths, be it the Sirens who lured sailors to their death by their enchanted singing; the Gorgons, whose look turned men to stone; the Hindu goddess Kali Ma who is often pictured squatting over her dead consort Shiva “devouring his entrails while her yoni sexually devours his lingam, penis” ; or the Sphinx, who would devour all who could not solve her riddles, reveals, not only man’s fear of death (its incarnate woman/nature), but his denial of the Earth Mother and his triumph over her. For in each of these stories woman represents a rite of passage into manhood, into power over death and therefore over women, nature and his own mortality. It is “this turning towards an absorbing preoccupation with individual mortality,” which brings man to his new role: Hero, and his new cultural system: Patriarchy.

As described by Wolfgang Lederer, M.D. in his book *The Fear of Women*, one can see this “Great Reversal” played out: “The Ona of Tierra del Fuego, [who] having lived long enough in abject fear of and subjugation by their women and their women’s magic ability to cause sickness and death, finally carried out the clever plan of killing all initiated [menstruating] women, and then setting up a secret magical society of

men. This immediately placed them in a position to intimidate not only little girls, who were the sole survivors of the massacre, but also future women.”

The grouping of men in secret societies is an interesting phenomenon which, in one way or another, secret or not, has been and still is a product of human culture, be it the consuls of Rome, the monastical societies of Catholicism, the Congress of the United States, the fraternal organizations such as Yales’ Skull and Crossbones Society, or the various military services around the world. “Is not tremendous strength in men of the impulse to creative work in every field precisely due to the feeling of playing a relatively small part in the creation of new living beings. . . .?” Is this phenomenon not also a connection to the birth of patriarchy?

One can also draw from these myths that man has “realized, in a rational sense, his biological role in the life creating process, [and that] he was in fact in full control of the fate of woman.” Why else would he so freely kill all initiated women or begin to create myths in which women giving birth is dependent upon the male form. (In Greece, Athens was born from the head of Zeus, Aphrodite from the cut-off phallus of Uranus when it bobbed in the sun. In Greenland, a woman grew out of man’s thumb, in Polynesia, out of a man’s urine, in Mesopotamia, out of his rib.)

And then there is Woman born out of Man—A woman, who in the images and literature created by man, lost her role as the sexual, magical Earth Mother, and was reborn as a symbol of man’s fears and hopes and

dreams. She becomes for man a symbol of sin or salvation, of evil incarnate or spiritual purity. She becomes not woman but man's unconscious fear as seen in the extreme portrayal of the sexual, evil Eve who leads men astray and as the unconscious ideal as portrayed in the images of the Madonna—nurturing, caring, mothering and non-sexual. She is the Virgin Mary after all.

These perverted images of woman, however, created for women impossible standards, and for men, disappointment and fear. “. . . . To the extent to which they are man's inspiration and ideal, they fill this role not thanks to who and what they are, but thanks to men's insistence on seeing them as such. Whether she likes it or not, man idealizes woman. And she may not like it at all: for with respect to the ideal she is suppose to be, she cannot but fall short; and this contributes, *noles volens*, to another of man's fears of woman; that intruding obstinately and necessarily through her real being on his ideal dream of her, she will forever, or sooner or later, be his disappointment. For what she seems to promise, but fails to keep—her everlasting beauty and youth and selfless loyalty and patience and what not else—man has always blamed her, little caring the it was never she who promised all this, but altogether his own imagination.”

Are we the stories we tell ourselves? And what are our stories? Once upon a time a woman was venerated and worshipped as the symbol of life and procreative powers. And then the stories were supplanted. New

stories emerged in which woman's powers were denigrated and her nature perverted.

In America, at the peak of the Romantic Era, a writer emerges who reimagines the myths and stories that govern western culture, a writer who sees that the nature of woman has been perverted through man's imagination. His name is Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864).

He was a man who lived in America during a time when people were re-discovering folklore, mythology and secular fairytales. A time that venerated the noble savage and questioned the scientific community. A time that was brimming with speeches and tracts and coalitions arguing for the equality of women, for the abolition of slavery, for a society where all people are created equal. A time when the seed for a new consciousness about man and woman and sexuality was waiting to be planted.

One such tale that captured Nathaniel Hawthorne's imagination is that told about beautiful maidens (Vishna Kanyas) fed on poisons who acted as executioners for kings in ancient India. The stories are believed to have originated in ancient Sanskrit texts and travelled to Greece, making an appearance in a secret communication sent by Aristotle to Alexander the Great. In his letter he reminds Alexander not to trust his body to a woman by recalling the "rich gifts" he received from the King of India, "among them that beautiful maiden whom they had fed on poison until she was the nature of a snake, and had I not perceived it because of my

fear. . .and had I not found proof that she would be killing me by her embrace and by her perspiration, she would surely have killed me.”

In 1844 Nathaniel Hawthorne’s publishes a short story in the magazine *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* that turns the ancient tale of the Vishna Kanyas on its head. The poisoned maiden, Beatrice, is a beautiful young woman, a sister of nature, an innocent about patriarchal attitudes concerning the natures of man and woman. In the story she is suckled on poison, a poison representative of life and love and nature, of birth and death and the immortality attainable only by the union of a man and woman. But Beatrice is misunderstood by man because men’s eyes have been blinded by centuries of patriarchal myths and stories and rather than become a killer of man, Beatrice is killed by the men who love her: “. . . the poor victim of man’s ingenuity and of thwarted nature, and of the fatality that attends all efforts of perverted wisdom, perished there, at the feet of her father and Giovanni.” But Beatrice “before sinking down upon the ground murmurs: ‘I would fain have been loved, not feared. But now it matters not. . . . Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?’”

What Hawthorne suggests in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is a new mythology beyond fear to enlightenment, a new mythology in which woman, as she has been defined by man, is but a victim of perverted wisdom. What is more perverted, Hawthorne asks, than the sentencing to death, or, as it resulted in *The Scarlet Letter*, the public chastisement upon the scaffold and banishment from the community, of a woman, who

out of wedlock, brings forth new life, gives birth to a child? What does Hester Prynne standing on a scaffold with her baby child in her arms awaiting sentencing by a council of men represent? What does Hester Prynne with her beautifully embroidered letter “A” on her heart symbolize? Certainly not the Madonna, although she is a mother figure. Certainly not Eve, for her “sin” as it is revealed, was an act of “Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance that it overflows upon the outward world.” Who is Hester Prynne? “She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. . . . The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman. . . .” Hester Prynne could have been that angel and apostle. Unfortunately, we are still, 131 years later, waiting for a new truth to be revealed.

Is a new truth arising? When a man writes a book and in his concluding paragraphs asks: “So we do not fear woman? Then why rapists and wife-beaters and all those who are potent only with a woman defective or somehow interior?” I can only add more questions: Why the images of women being put through a meat grinder and mutilating her own genitals? Why films about women being beaten, raped and murdered supposedly to stimulate sexual pleasure? Why the backlash against feminism and a longing for a 1950’s morality? Why a growing body of literature about impotent males? If not out of fear and envy of woman

and her biological function, then what? “In the Orthogenic school in Chicago . . . the boys admit to envying girls their breasts, their genitalia, their ability to bear children, and they hate them for it, and dream of violence; cut off their breasts, tear out their vaginas—one wonders: How much sadistic crime against women derives from such envy?”

Is a new truth arising? Or is feminism going to be thwarted yet again? Will the world in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* find resonance? Will we again witness the burning of women at the stake? Or is our persecution more subtle?

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