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feminist mysticism

BY CAROL IANNONE

It is certainly no news that feminism is not what it used to be. Interested observers have perhaps been surprised to hear feminists glorifying family life and extolling many aspects of traditional female behavior. But yes, we are being told that the movement has passed out of its first stage. First-stage or egalitarian feminism was undermined by the absurdity of its own implications. In the fevered desire to be equal to men, women found that their own biological nature became their worst enemy. We have been told that a second-stage feminism is reinstating the importance of such "female" values that had been lost in the first-stage fervor for equality — for example sharing, generosity, nurturance.

This shift in focus to the idea of "female" values has occurred not only in popular and political thought but in the movement's academic rearguard as well, where it is taking on the greater sophistication of a purported third stage and promising vast changes for our collective intellectual life. In November 1981, the *New York Times* devoted a front-page report to the burgeoning community of academic feminist scholars. These scholars, the article said, see their work as far more than a simple addition to traditional intellectual history. After trying both separatism and mainstreaming as tactics for feminist thought in college courses, these scholars argue that feminist scholarship has entered a third, "corrective" stage in which its discoveries challenge the very assumptions of our culture. They claim that traditional scholarship is by no means a benign and neutral heritage for all, but, in effect, a biased, sexist ideology characterized less by "universal" thought than by "male" patterns of thinking. Their goal is to discover, develop, and install the lost "female" element in each discipline.

And some months ago, the *New Republic* featured an article by Benjamin R. Barber, professor of political science at Rutgers, that

attempted a deeper analysis of the hierarchies of feminist thought. A third stage is necessary, Barber avers, because the second stage's celebration of female virtues seems indistinguishable from the original "feminine mystique" that produced the women's movement in the first place. Barber argues that in the first stage, feminists demanded that women think like men. In the second, they insisted that it's all right to think like a woman. But the third stage goes even farther to demand that female modes of thinking be accepted as equal to male. Like the feminists quoted in the *Times* article, Barber eagerly anticipates the profound revision the "female" perspective will bring to mainstream intellectual life.

The viability of the distinction between stages two and three is really quite dubious, and the fact is that there has been a serious turnabout in feminist theory. It appears that the idea of separate male and female modes of thought and perception has now been blandly accepted as the good news that feminism was charged to bear. Hardly anyone, it seems, is examining the concept and the "proof" being offered for it. Still fewer seem to have noted how radically it conflicts with earlier feminism's egalitarian activist aims, and finally, with any kind of feminist aim at all. For, while feminist scholars have reversed their direction, and have gone from denying sexual differences to emphasizing and even valorizing them, in doing so, they have had to accept and even glorify some of the worst elements of male chauvinist myth. It is hard to understand how these feminists can fail to see the case they are making for the old traditional views and the way in which they are undermining their own goals.

Before elaborating on this point, I'd like to examine briefly the "methodology" that is most conspicuously operating in the new feminist criticism. We might look at the example of it that so impressed Professor Barber. Barber quotes feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan as she substantiates her argument for the existence of a separate female type of morality:

The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth [typical of male moral judgment] has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life. This willingness links Gandhi to the Biblical Abraham, who prepared to sacrifice the life of his son in order to demonstrate the integrity and supremacy of his faith. Both men, in the commitments of their fatherhood, stand in implicit contrast to the woman who comes before Solomon and verifies her motherhood by relinquishing truth in order to save the life of her child.

Now this may have a certain superficial truth about it, a kind of quaint,

folklorish wisdom about the two sexes (although something we might have expected to hear in the fifties rather than the eighties). But is it scholarship? The “methodology” seems to build entirely from the assumption that if a male or female figure appears in a parable or story, this means we are to make direct associations between the type of behavior the figure represents and gender.

At least three objections can be made to this assumption. One, what about other incidents in the Bible, when women or men defy their so-called gender morality? For example, Jesus sacrificed principle to life when he extended forgiveness to the woman taken in adultery. Jezebel, on the other hand, was willing to sacrifice the life of Elias to her principles (worship of Baal). Even more important is the second objection. Why has the character’s sex been assigned such a direct and simplistic meaning? Given the evangelistic purpose of the Bible, is it not more likely that the stories are meant to be seen symbolically? If male and female characters are part of a story, the idea being projected may have to do with different kinds of characteristics that are within the potential scope of each individual rather than with gender. Finally, and most important, the feminist analysis given above misses the whole point of both stories. Both “female” and “male” moralities would be tragic if it were not for the balancing effect of the outside agent, combining mercy and justice. So, with female morality alone, the wrong, unloving woman would get the baby, but for the intervention of Solomon’s wisdom. Likewise male morality alone would have destroyed both Isaac and the future of Israel were it not for God’s mercy shown at the penultimate moment. Thus we see that even when we grant the weight of restrictive sexual categories, we wind up in half truths, even falsehoods.

But I want to get back to the amazing contradiction between feminism’s stage one and stage two/three, a contradiction that has not been sufficiently noted. How did the change come about and where is it leading? I propose to examine the phenomenon of what I call feminist mysticism (special female modes of thinking, knowing, perceiving, and so on) through the feminist work done on literature.

Like feminism itself, feminist literary criticism has seen some remarkable shifts in its theoretical understructure. In the late sixties and early seventies, this criticism worked to expose “sexist” attitudes in literature, attitudes based on traditionally defined differences between men and women (for example, masculine activity, feminine passivity). The assumption behind this approach was that, were it not

for cultural imposition, men and women would be pretty much the same. Indeed, the course of earlier feminism and its literary criticism seemed to be summed up in this bright promise by feminist critic Dorin Schumacher: that “the idea of sex may be seen as simply that — an *idea* in the mind of the writer, and not necessarily something that must be accepted as real.”

Almost imperceptibly, however, another strand of thought began to develop in feminist speculation—one that might have been thought incompatible with the first wave of feminist insistence on equality. An interest emerged in what would be called by a variety of names: feminine consciousness, the female sensibility, the female identity, the female tradition, the female heritage. “We must find our own language and a fresh voice We are creating our own culture, from past and present sources,” proclaimed an early feminist literary journal (*Aphra I*, #1). In other words, there *are* differences between men and women. The problem lies in how these have been traditionally defined.

At times it seemed a synthesis could be found between early feminism and the wish expressed in the important later anthology of women’s poetry, *No More Masks*: that is, an affirmation of the belief “in the uniqueness of women.” “We are not men,” the editors insisted, “nor do we want to be. We are interested in our differences.” The solution might lie in the idea that women did not wish simply to step into the world men have created, but to transform it, thus they needed to discover and preserve those qualities that would help them resist the abuses of power that they found typical of men. A second corollary idea bridged the contradiction by suggesting that women needed to discover their own true feminine identity and not to accept patriarchal definitions. Both ideas, however, strayed far from the egalitarian activism to which feminists were consciously committed into a new kind of quietism: the idea that men and women literally inhabit separate worlds and therefore have different reality systems, complete with different psychological and linguistic practices. This amounted to a virtual feminine mysticism. The search was on for female imagery, female language, female traditions, female myths, female forms, and even a female concept of poetic inspiration (how could it come to women through the traditional female muse?).

This was an ironic twist of events, bringing a startling chain of reversals in its wake. When a literary “double standard” was mentioned prior to, say, 1975, it meant what early feminist critic Mary

Ellmann mockingly called “phallic criticism” — male critics reading books by women with reference to the sex of the author. Little did anyone know that a few short years later, feminist critics would be out-Heroding Herod through the establishment of a new double standard by which to judge the work of female writers. This new standard was necessary, the feminists insisted, inasmuch as female writers cannot be held to criteria like generalization, objectivity, and universality, because the sources of their experience are different from the patriarchal traditions that generate these qualities. Indeed, the critics said, subjectivity will be more visible in female poetry, because the elements that make men objective are no part of the female acculturation process.

Likewise, it was said, female autobiographies could not be held to the same standards as male. A book like Kate Millet's *Flying*, generally scored by critics for its confusion, pointlessness, lack of organization, idiosyncratic references, and tedious detail, must be understood as a new kind of female art. Why? Because “any demand that women write the same kind of formal, distilled narrative we usually get from men implies a belief that women share the same kind of reality as men; clearly this is not the case,” argued Annette Kolodny in a lengthy apologia for the Millet book. Whether or not this is “clearly” the case, what is clear is that the revolution had ended with what it had termed the worst chauvinist myth: that women are incapable of logic and objectivity.

A similar reversal occurred in the view of female biology and its role in creativity. A male critic caught unaware by the feminist movement in 1968 was perhaps surprised at being suddenly assailed for discussing a female author's sexual experience or lack of it in his review of her book. But he was no doubt even more surprised ten years later to find feminist literary critics themselves making pointed reference to whether a female author had married, borne children, or lived out of wedlock. Furthermore, in pre-mystical days, Ellmann and other feminists had suggested that “phallic critics” employing the “ovarian theory of literature” had wrongly made artistic creation seem abnormal for a woman. But in 1978, Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's 700-page *Madwoman in the Attic* was devoted to expounding how the nineteenth-century female writers managed the monumentally difficult task of being both women and writers. By the time Minda Rae Amiran could be found asserting in the pages of *College English* that insufficient proof exists to establish that men and women live in separate spheres, and could be found asserting this as an argument

against feminist critics, the circle had been completely closed, since only a few years before this had been feminism's chief argument against patriarchy.

The ironies were not lost on certain feminist critics who hastened to point out the creeping discrepancies. Elaine Showalter, for example, directed attention to what should have been obvious: that “the theory of a female sensibility revealing itself in an imagery and form specific to women always runs dangerously close to reiterating the familiar stereotypes.” Showalter offered a further caution. Such a theory can suggest — and she implies that this would be unfortunate — “permanence, a deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world.” But before long even wary critics like Showalter had capitulated with some version of “women's culture,” and what Showalter had called the “deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female” had become the feminists' chief stock in trade (over the howls of creative writers like Cynthia Ozick and Joyce Carol Oates, who resented the pinch of their new classification as “women writers”).

What had happened? Quite simply, before the insurgence of the “female sensibility,” feminist criticism had reached a dead end. Time and again, feminist critics were finding that they could not advance beyond the questionable occupation of cataloguing images of women in literature, as feminist critic Annette Kolodny pointed out in 1975 in a review essay in the feminist periodical *Signs*. And if this cataloguing was not very fruitful for enhancing an appreciation of literature, neither was it very useful politically.

The literary criticism produced by the cataloguing approach had proved entirely unsatisfactory, even to feminists. So far from establishing sex as having no reality, this kind of criticism kept getting stuck in images of women as victims of or rebels against male domination. Aside from being monotonous, this approach had a built-in ambivalence. A female character's defeat could be either revolutionary — in that it exposed women's oppression in patriarchy — or reactionary — in that it discouraged women readers' aspirations. Likewise ambivalent were female triumphs: revolutionary — in that they encouraged women readers — and reactionary — in that they presented what feminists saw as a false view of female possibilities under patriarchy.

Literature written by women had also failed to respond to the revolutionary demands of feminism. Here the feminist endeavor was less to expose sexist attitudes than to find a kind of hidden rebellion

against patriarchal strictures. But here too the assumption was that women should rightfully oppose traditionally imposed sexual differences. As it turned out, however, what in women's literature was great tended to resist feminist ideology; what was strongly feminist tended not to be literature after all. Further, much subliterate or popular literature by women was, upon careful analysis, found not only *not* to contain the hoped for coded radicalism, but to be downright reactionary. Even full-length feminist analyses of literature by women were coming out, at least in the long run, with endorsements of traditional literary values and traditional human values as well. The mid-seventies saw the publication of a number of ambitious books about women writers — Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination*, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, and Ellen Moers's *Literary Women*. But these critics made no attempt to revise critical standards to make room for forgotten female authors; their sense of what constitutes a great work of art remained firmly traditional. The unspoken conclusion of these tentative quests for a "female" tradition as an alternative to the "male" was that the generally accepted tradition was not "male" at all but really a larger human tradition applicable to writers of both sexes.

Furthermore, feminist critics found themselves in a frustrating position. Unable any longer to claim discrimination since Women's Studies departments were burgeoning and feminist criticism was being widely published, they could nonetheless sense that no one was really listening. As Kolodny noted in 1976, feminist criticism "had made little discernible impact on the larger academic or critical community."

A couple of years later, Cheri Register inadvertently testified to the aimlessness of feminist criticism when, after a half-hearted attempt to document important new trends in feminist criticism, she wondered, "What are we doing really? What is feminist about that? What makes it literary criticism?" Despite what would seem to be a persistent and basic directionlessness, Register insisted that feminist criticism must continue because, as she mournfully reported, "We have transformed neither literary criticism nor the world."

Here was the key. The cart was now openly before the horse. It was not that critics were finding literary material opening up to feminist analysis; it was that the feminist analysis *must* be made to prevail over literature for political reasons. A recent article expresses it even more blatantly: referring to the idea of a feminine consciousness in

literary language, Mary Jacobus declares, "We need it, so we invent it."

By 1982, Jane Marcus was desperate enough about the situation to prophesy the coming of the "literary amazon," the feminist critic of genius who will "deliver us from slavery to the canon, from racist, sexist and classist misreadings." But if one were to analyze some of the thorny impasses in feminist criticism to date, one would find little reason to hope for a Messiah. The problem is not in the critics — feminist critics are as bright and as imaginative and as productive as they come. The "problem" is in literature itself and its resistance to political manipulation. As Joan Didion warned in the movement's early days, "Art is in most ways hostile to ideology."

But the great shift occurred anyway. Feminists weren't winning the game, so they changed the rules. If traditional literary aesthetics and the traditional literary canon were in the way of revolution, the answer was, get rid of them, something eminently possible in the irreverent atmosphere of contemporary literary criticism. Since "literary history is a fiction, a model of our own making," Annette Kolodny announced, "all the feminist is asserting is her own right to liberate new (and perhaps) different significances from" the "texts." The "new (and perhaps) different significances" were sexual ones. Not being able to make much of a case out of the more egalitarian feminist model, feminist critics turned to the one thing perhaps least expected of them: womanly emphasis on sex and insistence on their special abiding differences as females.

It should be obvious by now, however, that such insistence is self-defeating for feminism. To work in terms of female forms, female language, female morality, female culture, and so on is to intensify the limitations of gender. Such notions constitute mysticism—a retreat from life as it is into an esoteric ideology that may seem comforting in the short run but is pernicious in the long. Of course there are differences between men and women (and it was none other than the feminists who challenged these differences in the first place), but the new mystical version of feminine nature is really just another evasion, no truer to life than the original feminist model of absolute sameness. The mystical model is an intellectual rendition of the ultra-feminine, hysterical seductiveness projected by a woman who is at base unsure about her femininity. Having denied the basic and obvious sexual differences, as well as their implications, feminists are forced to see sexuality everywhere, even in language, literature, and morality. Cer-

tain truisms about sexual differences, which were once attacked by earlier feminist ideology, are now taken to such extremes that women are seen to be in possession of some kind of primitive magic that practically makes them a separate species. For example, Annette Kolodny has gone so far as to argue that the "daily conversational exchanges" between men and women foster the "illusion of a wholly shared common language" and mask the "inaccessibility of female meaning to male interpretation." Men must therefore "learn to apprehend the meanings encoded in texts by and about women."

Also ironic is the way in which this mysticism is serving as a cover, a front really, for female advancement, as if the advancement were not a value in itself. A respondent to the Barber article in the *New Republic* explained that the purpose of third-stage feminism is to "demonstrate the value of those *human* virtues that women have developed more often than men, at least partially because of the restrictions on their lives." And the aim of the third stage is to "incorporate these desirable traits into all our institutions—not to leave them the exclusive province of women." It appears, then, that this newer feminist ideology centers on the idea of a female moral ascendancy. Although feminists might hasten to disavow any *innate* moral superiority, and might even rhetorically deny that any female superiority exists at all, the fact is, the whole thrust of feminist mysticism is to claim for women a moral purity not possessed by men, corrupted as they are by individualism and aggressiveness. So pervasive is this idea throughout feminist literature and throughout much current thought as well that we hardly recognize it any longer for the simplistic ideological assumption it is.

It seems that feminist mysticism locates the source of all evil in "male power." The extent to which this idea has been accepted is astonishing. But once again we are in the land of folklore. In certain vague ways it may seem that women are "better" than men—they are the sex that gives life (a function not always celebrated by feminists in other contexts, however), not the sex that kills, for example. It seems easy to conclude that men are more at cause for the evils of history, since they have held most of the positions of public power. But just how far can this contrast be taken before it gets silly? Are we really to believe that women are any less capable of evil than men? of breaking the Ten Commandments? of abusing children? All those people pouring into psychiatrists' offices and mental-health clinics

have only their fathers to blame? And who's been raising all these ferocious little males anyway?

Feminists seem to think that there is only one kind of evil—that arising from violence or aggression, the kind of behavior more commonly associated with men. But women aren't any less capable of evil because their superficial behavior is less identifiably aggressive. George Orwell makes a distinction between two kinds of evil that is apposite here. He contrasts a parent who aggressively threatens physical violence to control a child with one who cajolingly tries to manipulate the child through guilt. "And who would maintain," Orwell asks, "that the second method is less tyrannous than the first? The distinction that really matters," he continues, "is not between violence and non-violence, but between having and not having the appetite for power." Feminists want power, they just don't want to admit nakedly that they want it. And this covert need for power is one of the motivations, perhaps unconscious, behind feminist mysticism.

For, indeed, despite its subversion of some of the basic goals and principles of feminism, mysticism does provide a package of psychological benefits for feminists. As I have suggested, mysticism forms a good cover for their quest for power. Feminism as another dualism, male bad, female good—unreal but emotionally reassuring—forms a base from which women can achieve without guilt. For it seems that second/third stage feminism is to some degree in retreat from the more directly assertive qualities claimed for women in the first wave of feminism, almost as if women themselves were uncomfortable with these qualities, perhaps uncomfortable with their own advance into public life. Further, it would appear that the insistence on the moral purity of women vs. the depravity of men—coupled with the idea that the world is at the threshold of destruction as the result of male power gone amok—gives women a fresh justification for their advance. In short, feminist mysticism is a ploy to make women feel there is a special need for them. They are not just moving ahead like everybody else for "selfish" reasons. (In addition, it removes the onus of responsibility from individual women. If anything goes wrong, it can be attributed to the masculine bias of our culture, not to women.) Ironically, however, this idea fulfills the traditional image of women as ministers to others' needs, only now the "others" are the whole planet.

But of course, no one—not women, not men, not the planet—

is really served by emotional and intellectual dishonesty. The world is not bad because of men; it's bad because people have an unfortunate capacity for evil — for pride, hatred, envy, greed, malice, lust, selfishness, self-deception, and self-righteousness. Every time a woman goes on about female virtues in a male-dominated world, she is admitting her inability to face life as it is — without a screening ideology to lessen its harshness. But it's only by facing life as it is, not by pointing fingers at repositories of evil like male power (or Jewish influence, or black inferiority) that we can make any real improvement at all.

Now who would have thought we'd have to tell this to a group of liberals like the feminists?

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short story shortening

BY PERCY SEITLIN

Pride

Cordoba: D. H. Lawrence would have noticed the pride with which so many young Spanish mothers carry their cleanly clad babies in the town.

Often, the mother holds the baby so high that, sitting on the throne of her arms, it is taller than she.

Here's a young woman carrying her baby on the way to the market square. She's lame. One of her legs is slightly withered. By marrying her, her husband has compensated her a thousand times over and will remain better than clear of debt to her for the rest of his life. His grace will prevail; she will never cross him.

I've also concluded that this is her first and only child for all time, and that before she became pregnant and bore it there was some question as to whether she would be capable of having a child at all. I know, too, that very early this morning, the husband went off on his motorcycle to his job as stonemason? carpenter? electrician? and that the baby, not more than eight months old now, has come between the husband and his young wife, as babies do. But the husband's whole upbringing has prepared him for this and he is a proud father. Nevertheless, he — a usurper — has been usurped. But the two years he lived alone with his wife before the baby came were much too long. By the time she gave birth, he was ready for it and only vaguely aware that he could have remained a son if he had never become a father.

I know that after work he does not go home directly but stops at a bodega for a glass of wine and a game of *dados*. The bodega is alive