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女权主义简史

Feminism

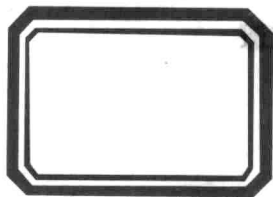
A Very Short Introduction

Margaret Walters 著

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Introduction

'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is', the writer Rebecca West remarked, sardonically, in 1913. 'I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.' The word was a comparatively new one when she wrote; it had only appeared in English – from the French – in the 1890s. Interestingly, the earliest examples of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary carried negative meanings. In 1895 the *Athenaeum* sneeringly referred to a piece about a woman whose 'coquetting with the doctrines of feminism' are traced with real humour. 'In Germany feminism is openly socialistic', the *Daily Chronicle* shuddered in 1908, and went on to dismiss out of hand 'suffragists, suffragettes and all the other phases in the crescendo of feminism'.

In those years, some writers used an alternative term – 'womanism' – with the same hostility. One long-forgotten writer was roused to angry sneers in his memoirs when he recalled meeting an intellectual woman living in Paris (she comes across, despite his prejudices, as lively and interesting) whose writings reflected 'the strong-minded womanism of the nineteenth century'.

Curiously, one of the sharpest attacks on the word 'feminism' came from Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One's Own* is such an effective and engaging plea for women. In *Three Guineas*, written in

1938 in the shadow of fascism and of approaching war, and probably nervous about any '-ism', she rejects the word out of hand. No one word can capture the force 'which in the nineteenth century opposed itself to the force of the fathers', she insists, continuing:

Those nineteenth century women were in fact the advance guard of your own movement. They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state.

They were called, to their resentment, feminists, she claims (she is historically inaccurate – the word was unknown in the previous century), and she goes on to insist that we must

destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day. The word 'feminist' is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women.' Since the only right, the right to earn a living has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word.

Feminism

But though Virginia Woolf's 'right to earn a living' was, and remains, central to feminism, getting on for a century after she wrote it is clear that its attainment by no means solved all women's problems. Women's work – despite the much-publicized earnings of some high-fliers in the business world – remains lower paid; or, in the case of housework, not paid at all. When Woolf was writing in the 1920s, feminists had hardly begun to articulate, let alone address, women's special problems: issues to do with childbirth and child-rearing, or the strain on women who had to combine housework and/or childcare with work outside the home.

Over the centuries, and in many different countries, women have spoken out for their sex, and articulated, in different ways, their complaints, their needs, and their hopes. As this is a Very Short Introduction, I have concentrated on feminism in one country,

England, and have tried to explore its development through time. While women in other countries have had different experiences and definitions, in England, right up until the 1960s at least, the word 'feminist' was usually pejorative. Very few women, however deeply engaged in fighting for women's rights, would have described themselves as 'feminists'. When women began to organize again in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement called itself Women's Liberation (borrowing the term from black, Third World, and student movements). This was often shortened, sometimes affectionately, sometimes in a derogatory way, to 'women's lib'. But those years also saw the word 'feminism' being brought back into general use, and its meaning was extended. Though there was still a justified concern that civil and legal equality had not been fully achieved, the new movement tended to concentrate on problems specific to women in their reproductive and social roles. In those years, too, feminists in Britain made an attempt, at least, to reach out across national boundaries and discover what they had – or did not have – in common with feminists abroad.

But how often, still, do we hear women anxiously asserting 'I'm not a feminist but . . .' as they go on to make claims that depend upon, and would be impossible without, a feminist groundwork? The American feminist Estelle Freedman argues that right from its origins, the word has carried negative connotations; that surprisingly few politically engaged women have styled themselves feminists. In the 1990s some feminists in England and the United States identified and warned against a 'backlash' against feminism and its undoubted achievements. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, for example, called their third collection of essays *Who's Afraid of Feminism?*, with a cartoon of a big bad wolf on the original jacket cover. They argued that 'attacks on feminism frequently merge into a wider misogyny'; 'the feminist' is now the name given to the disliked or despised woman, much as 'man-hater' or 'castrating bitch', 'harridan' or 'witch', were used before the 1960s. They added that women also have to expose and eradicate the misogyny inherent in feminism itself.

Just as troubling is the caution that the term ‘feminism’ seems to arouse in many younger women, a surprising number of whom seem to shy away from the concept. One English tabloid recently published a double-page spread entitled ‘Is Feminism Dead?’, which managed, neatly enough, to sit on the fence; equal space was devoted to arguments yes and no, to those who felt the term was still urgently relevant, and to those who were sure it was dated, even embarrassing, and should be retired. The piece was illustrated with a photograph of ‘militant women’s libbers’ picketing a Miss World demonstration. (In fact, everyone in the photo was laughing.) Faintly embarrassed, I recognized my much younger self, with long hair and long skirts, clutching a distinctly uninspired placard announcing that ‘women are people too’. I had almost forgotten that the Miss World contests still existed (in those bad old days it was on prime-time television), until in 2002 the event received unexpected publicity, first when Nigerian militants demonstrated violently against its ‘parade of nudity’, which they thought would encourage promiscuity and Aids, then when several contestants refused to participate because a young Nigerian woman, sentenced to death under Islamic sharia law for having become pregnant outside marriage, was reprieved – but only until she had weaned her baby. The beauty queens’ gesture was both courageous and effective, though interestingly, one insisted, with a hint of anxiety, that she took up her stand, certainly not because she was a feminist, or even because she was a woman, but because she was a human being.

When I recently asked some women in their early 20s – some of whom were university-educated, others working, and all, clearly, beneficiaries of earlier battles for women’s rights – whether they considered themselves feminists, or indeed had any interest in feminism, most of them replied, flatly, no. The very term itself, one woman claimed, sounds stuffy and out of date. Feminism, she felt, has become, on the one hand, a playground for extremists – she termed them ‘fundamentalists’ – who had nothing useful to say to women like herself. On the other hand, she argued, feminism has become ‘institutionalized’, and she compared it to communism: it

demands commitment, not simply to ideas, but to a generalized ideology. Moreover, she added, it is nowadays just another academic subject. You can get a degree in 'gender studies' and that, she felt, is the real kiss of death: proof, if any were needed, that feminism is no longer urgently relevant. Perhaps these younger women will feel differently in ten years or so, when they find themselves juggling family, housework, and a job; perhaps they will find that they need to re-invent feminism to suit their own experience. But in a way, I hope they will not need to.

Chapter 1

The religious roots of feminism

Some of the first European women to speak out for themselves, and for their sex, did so within a religious framework, and in religious terms. It is perhaps not always easy, in our secular society, to bring them back to life: to recognize fully their courage, or to understand the implications, or the extent, of their challenge to the status quo.

For centuries, and all over Europe, there were families who disposed of ‘unnecessary’ or unmarried daughters by shutting them away in convents. For some, this must have felt like life imprisonment; but for others, conventual quiet seems to have facilitated genuine fulfilment: it allowed some women to develop a talent for organization, and some were able to read and think, and discover their own distinctive voices. Hildegard of Bingen, who was born at the end of the 11th century and became a nun, and later the abbess, of a small Rhineland convent, has long been known as a remarkable and impressive writer; recently, her great musical talent has been rediscovered and celebrated. But she was sometimes plagued with doubts about her ‘unfeminine’ activities, and wrote to one of the leading churchmen of the time, Bernard of Clairvaux, asking if she – an uneducated woman – should continue with her writing and with composing. He encouraged her, and within a few years she was known and honoured all over Europe. When she was 60 years old, she embarked upon preaching tours all through the

German empire, even though at that time only priests were allowed to preach.

Like other medieval women, when seeking to imagine the almost unimaginable, and to communicate her understanding of God's love, she turned to womanly, and specifically maternal, experience, and wrote of the 'motherhood' of God. 'God showed me his grace again', she writes, 'as . . . when a mother offers her weeping child milk.' Some religious women imagine, with maternal tenderness, the infant Jesus. A Flemish Beguine meditates on what the mother of God must have felt:

for three or more days [she] held Him close to her so that He nestled between her breasts like a baby . . . sometimes she kissed him as though he were a little child and sometimes she held Him on her lap as if He were a gentle lamb.

'Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God . . . ?' asked the Englishwoman Julian of Norwich in the early 15th century. She marvelled that 'he who was her Maker chose to be born of the creature that is made'. Moreover, she argued:

our Saviour is our true mother in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed . . . We are redeemed by the motherhood of mercy and grace . . . to the nature of motherhood belong tender love, wisdom and knowledge, and it is good, for although the birth of our body is only low, humble and modest compared with the birth of our soul, yet it is he who does it in the beings by women it was done.

Whereas other women had made the analogy briefly, Julian of Norwich goes on to spell out the comparison very directly. Christ is like

the kind, loving mother who knows and recognizes the need of her

child, and carefully watches over it. The mother can give her child milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly . . .

Margery Kempe, a contemporary of Julian's who travelled from her Essex home to visit her, produced an account of her own life – probably dictated to a scribe – that has been described as the first autobiography in English. Her life story reveals, only too clearly, why her self-preoccupation and her melodramatic acting out of her own miseries infuriated so many people who came into contact with her. But her story is also, unexpectedly, a deeply touching one; and more than that, it is impressive simply because she insists on taking herself and her experiences seriously. Margery came up against the painful and terrible aspect of the motherhood that had inspired the celibate Julian. She was miserably ill all through her first pregnancy, and after a prolonged and very painful birth, was left exhausted and depressed: 'what with the labour she had in childbirthing and the sicknesse going before, she despaired of her life'. At times, she came near to killing herself. She was comforted, she recalls, by a vision of Christ, in the form of a handsome young man sitting at her bedside; he informed her that 'you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband'. But it was only years later, and after 14 pregnancies, that Margery finally managed to negotiate a deal with her demanding mortal husband: if he stopped insisting on sex, she would pay off his debts, and forgo her strict Friday fast to eat and drink with him. He agreed, though with a hint of sarcasm that echoes nastily across the centuries: 'May your body be as freely available to God as it has been to me.'

With remarkable energy and determination, Margery then set out across Europe on a pilgrimage, and though her constant weeping and wailing so infuriated her fellow pilgrims that they abandoned her en route, her courage – and obsessive determination – enabled her to reach Jerusalem, and eventually to get as far as Constantinople.

By the late 16th century, increasing numbers of women were beginning to argue their case more consistently and more aggressively, though still within a religious framework. The Reformation enabled more women to receive an education. In 1589, in what one historian has called ‘the earliest piece of English feminist polemic’, Jane Anger took up a challenging position by insisting that Eve was superior to Adam: a second, and hence improved, model. Whereas Adam was fashioned from ‘dross and filthy clay’, God made Eve from Adam’s flesh, ‘that she might be purer than he’, which ‘doth evidently show how far we women are more excellent than men . . . From woman sprang man’s salvation. A woman was the first that believed, and a woman likewise the first that repented of sin.’ Anger then descends crossly, and comically, to everyday domestic life. It is women, she reminds us, who make sure that men are fed, clothed, and cleaned: ‘without our care they lie in their beds as dogs in litter, and go like lousy mackerel swimming in the heat of summer’.

But any woman wanting to defend her sex had to tackle powerfully negative scriptural images of women: Delilah was treacherous, Jezebel murderous, while Eve was directly responsible for the Fall of the human race: ‘the woman tempted him and he did eat’. Saint Paul was regularly invoked against any woman who spoke out, or asked awkward questions about the Church’s attitude to women: ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak’, he instructed the Corinthians. And again, in the epistle to Timothy, ‘if they will learn anything let them ask their husbands at home: for it is shame for women to speak in the church’.

Gradually, a few women found the confidence to defy these scriptural prohibitions. Some offered dissenting interpretations of Genesis, arguing that Adam was, after all, as much to blame for the Fall as Eve. So, in 1611, Aemilia Lanyer reminded her readers that Christ

was begotten of a woman, born of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman ... he healed women, pardoned women, comforted women ... after his resurrection, appeared first to a woman.

And Rachel Speght sardonically remarked in 1617:

If Adam had not approved that deed which Eve had done, and been willing to tread the steps which she had gone, he being her head would have reproved her, have made the commandment a bit to restrain him from breaking his master's position.

Others insisted that God had signalled his forgiveness by making Mary, a descendant of Eve, the mother of Christ.

Feminism

In the course of the troubled 17th century, particularly among the sects, the many and various small groups that rejected the established Church in favour of purer forms of worship, women found more freedom. Some, at least, felt inspired to preach or to prophesy. Modern historians have pointed out the important role of women among the religious separatists who fled persecution in late Elizabethan England by emigrating to America or to Holland, as well as their activity as preachers. Women were active, too, among the small dissenting groups that managed to survive underground in England, until, during the Civil War and Interregnum, they emerged dramatically and vocally. Keith Thomas lists some of these independent congregations: Brownists, Independents, Baptists, Millenarians, Familists, Quakers, Seekers, Ranters. Whatever their theological differences, they all believed the necessity for spiritual regeneration in *every* individual. The experiencing of what Quakers called the 'Inner Light' was more important than external observance – and that light knows no sexual distinction. As one contemporary writer claimed, 'one faithful man, yea, or woman either, may as truly and effectually loose and bind, both in heaven and earth, as all the ministers in the world'.

Various independent congregations had, for some time, been allowing women to debate publicly and to vote on matters of Church business; by the 1640s some, particularly among the Quakers, were going further. In 1659, the Quaker Fox argued that 'Christ is in the male as in the female, who redeems from under the Law . . . Christ in the male and female, who are in the spirit of God, are not under the Law.'

'Might not the spirit of Christ, that is begotten of God in the female as well as the male . . . speak?' asked Katherine Evans and Sarah Chevers. Increasingly often, women felt moved, divinely inspired, to speak in meetings and even at service, though they were often greeted with bitter opposition. They were criticized for being 'puffed up with pride' and 'vainglorious arrogance', and even worse, for 'usurping authority over men'. In 1646, for example, John Vicars complained bitterly about 'bold impudent housewives . . . without all womanly modesty who take upon them . . . to prate . . . most directly contrary to the apostle's inhibition'.

John Bunyan was totally opposed to this active participation by women, arguing that Satan, inevitably, tempts the weaker Eve, rather than Adam: 'the man was made the head in worship, and the keeper of the garden of God'. He referred to women as 'that simple and weak sex'. Citing the first epistle to the Corinthians, he argued that women are 'not the image and glory of God as the men are. They are placed beneath.' He disapproved of separate women's meetings, which did nothing but encourage 'unruliness'. 'I do not believe they [women] should minister to God in prayer before the whole church,' he insisted, adding sarcastically, 'for then I should be a Ranter or a Quaker.' In any public gathering, 'her part is to hold her tongue, to learn in silence'.

Even in the 1670s, that courageous Quaker Margaret Fell still felt the need to defend women's independence of conscience, and their right to play an active part in worship. In a tract called *Women's Speaking Justified*, she argued emphatically: 'Those that speak



1. The scene is viewed with a hint of satire – though is it directed at the earnest speaker or at the inattentive audience? One is actually sleeping, others demonstrate disapproval.

against . . . the spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply by reason of her sex . . . speak against Christ and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent.'

The prophet Joel was sometimes cited as an answer to Saint Paul's prohibition of spirit upon all flesh: