Gender in the Mirror

CULTURAL IMAGERY & WOMEN'S AGENCY





ANA TIELJENS

MEYERS

GENDER

in the Mirror

Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency



DIANA TIETJENS MEYERS

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Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency

Diana Tietjens Meyers

In memory of my father, R. TIETJENS

PREFACE

My work is to inhabit the silences with which I have lived and fill them with myself until they have the sounds of brightest day and the loudest thunder.

- Audre Lorde, The Cancer Journals

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.

-Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

These quotations strike two themes that have always fascinated me—silence and voice, and mirroring and images. For me, what is so galvanizing about these themes is that they converge on questions about reflection and self-determination. How does one understand who one is and how one should live? How does self-understanding depend on speaking in one's own voice? How does one find one's own voice? And, supposing that one does, how then does one get heard? How does one translate one's self-understanding into action? How does one lead a life that is one's own?

Audre Lorde speaks of silences—her silences about her own experience and cultural silences about those who are marginalized, inferiorized, subordinated, and despised. These silences are not quiet, however. Cultural noise fills the aural void and covers it up. Discourses of derogation and cooptation generate an incessant, nullifying blather. This book is about that cultural noise pollution, its pernicious impact on women's lives, and what needs to be done to detoxify our social habitat.

One of the most lethal forms of this cultural pollution is the system of imagery that encodes gender stereotypes and norms. Virginia Woolf speaks of looking glasses and the images that play upon them. Women are captives of mirrors that are manufactured in patriarchal shops. When women aren't being reflected back as narcissists enamored with their own faces, they are drafted into service as reflecting surfaces for male egos. The mirrors that give women their self-images lie—they tell women they are ugly, fat, ungainly, worthless. The mirrors that women are expected to be erase their self-images—instead they beam back flattering images of men.

Women need mirrors that show them as the complex, distinctive, threedimensional individuals they are. To find those mirrors, women must shatter the silvered glass of entrenched gender imagery and create their own self-imagery. They must break the silence; they must tune out the cultural racket; they must speak their own lives. This book theorizes that emancipatory undertaking.

A Note on the Dedication

Although my father was a postwar, middle-class suburbanite, luckily for me he was in some respects a rather eccentric one. Unlike most of my girlfriends' fathers, he had wide-ranging cultural interests, and he took it upon himself to supplement my classroom education. I feel it is particularly fitting that this book be dedicated to his memory because, more than any of my previous books, this one bears the impress of his distinctive influence. Chapter 5, for instance, begins with some remarks about my experience studying ballet and goes on to theorize the twists and turns of successive retellings of the myth of Narcissus and the history of pictorial representations of women with mirrors in Western art. My father, who valued and enjoyed ballet, arranged for me to study at a first-rate ballet school and took me to many ballet performances. And long before the public schools got around to it, my father introduced me to mythology by reading me tales from Bullfinch's compilation. At a time when art education meant little more than finger painting, my father frequently took me to the Art Institute of Chicago and regaled me with his understanding of and his delight in all manner of art forms. I enjoyed and appreciated these attentions and excursions while I was still a child, and they endowed me with lasting interests and pleasures. It is, then, with untold gratitude and deep love, that I dedicate Gender in the Mirror to the memory of R. Tietjens (1906-2000).

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I also thank the University of Connecticut for a sabbatical leave during spring 2000, which gave me the luxury of working exclusively on this book at a crucial point in my thinking, and the NYU Department of Philosophy for hosting me as a visiting scholar during my sabbatical, which enabled me to complete my research at the Bobst Library.

Finally, I wish to express special gratitude to Jan Balascak, the manager of the News Cafe on University Place in New York City. While I was on sabbatical and working on this book, Jan and the friendly staff of this café—not to mention the excellent coffee, comfy back banquette, and congenial music—provided me with an ideal place for long hours of caffeine-enhanced manuscript revision. To be sure, a room of one's own is essential for writing, but so too, I find, is a pleasant roomful of strangers.

Parts of this book have appeared in other forms. I wish to acknowledge these previous publications and thank the publishers for allowing me to use this material. They include: "The Family Romance: A Fin-de-Siècle Tragedy," in Feminism and Families, edited by Hilde Nelson (Routledge, 1997); "Tropes of Social Relations and the Problem of Tropisms in Figurative Discourse," in Norms and Values: Essays in Honor of Virginia Held, edited by Mark Halfon and Joram Haber (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); "Miroir, Memoire, Mirage: Appearance, Aging, and Women," in Mother Time: Ethical Issues in Women and Aging, edited by Margaret Urban Walker (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); "Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!" in Relational Autonomy, edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford University Press, 2000); "The Rush to Motherhood-Pronatalist Discourse and Women's Autonomy," Signs (Spring 2001); "Marginalized Identities - Individuality, Groups, and Theory," in Marginal Groups and Mainstream American Culture, edited by Yolanda Estes, Arnold Lorenzo Farr, Patricia Smith, and Clelia Smyth (Kansas University Press, 2000); and "Feminism and Women's Autonomy: The Challenge of Female Genital Cutting," in Metaphilosophy (October 2000).

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GENDER IN THE MIRROR

CHAPTER ONE

Gender Identity and Women's Agency: Culture, Norms, and Internalized Oppression Revisited

What diverse women are like and how individual women go about conducting their lives are issues that go to the heart of feminism. Because patriarchal societies consider women inferior beings, and because these societies severely constrain women's choosing and acting, all feminists—theorists and activists alike—regard the questions of why women suffer these wrongs and how they can can be righted as crucial. Not surprisingly, then, the issues of women's identity and their agency inspire intense critical engagement not only with social conventions but also with the philosophical canon. The result has been a veritable cavalcade of theoretical advances.

Strangely, though, outbreaks of intellectual mischief and perhaps even obtuseness also tend to cluster at these sites of inquiry. As a number of commentators have observed, feminist theory is now and again marred by aberrant, unfeminist subtexts. Humanistic feminist Mary Wollstonecraft indulges in some quite unsympathetic, moralistic finger wagging at so-called womanly virtues. For Wollstonecraft, these qualities merely enshrine women's craven adaptation to a subordinate position. Likewise, a rather grandiose metaphysical hauteur surfaces in Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. Portraying women as mired in banal domestic routine and self-abnegating caregiving, de Beauvoir gives them no credit for their labor, nor does she disguise her contempt for what she terms women's "immanence." Whereas Wollstonecraft and de Beauvoir characterize women's identity as a trap and emphasize the tightness of its clasp to the point of

seeming misogynist, traces of a baffling, cavalier triumphalism are detectable in Judith Butler's poststructuralist feminism. According to Butler, gender identity is a pesky phantasm that we can dispatch without too much trouble—say by delighting in the "deviant" gender performances of drag queens. Emphasizing the superficiality of gender identity, as Butler does, seems to make light of women's subordination.

In my judgment, each of these theorists has a major insight regarding women's identity and agency but casts it in curiously exaggerated terms. Although this rhetorical strategy serves the useful purpose of magnifying a problematic aspect of women's lives, it also makes it difficult for ordinary women to recognize their lives in theories about them. In noting the flawed tenor of these views, however, I am neither disputing nor discounting these theorists' overall contributions. Rather, I wish to highlight the treachery of the identity/agency terrain.

Feminist theorists find the topics of women's identity and agency vexing, I submit, because a pair of dilemmas structures these issues. To acknowledge women's gender identity together with the history of women's subordination seems to entail ascribing a host of ingrained defects to women and thus to call for a radical transformation of feminine identity. Yet, since masculine identity leaves much to be desired, there is reason to valorize feminine identity as a locus of suppressed yet genuine values and as a desirable form of relationally grounded selfhood and subjectivity. With regard to women's agency, it seems that if women are systematically subordinated, their ability to choose and act freely must be gravely compromised. Yet, if feminist theorists are to respect women's dignity and if they are to defend women's capacity to emancipate themselves, it seems they must counter that women's agency has been concealed or overlooked, not diminished.

In this chapter, I explore the relations among norms encoded in gender discourse, gendered identity, and women's agency. A number of feminist theorists argue that gender is a feature of social structures or linguistic classification systems, but that who one is or what one is like need not be gendered. Rightly shunning a false universalism about gender, these theorists externalize gender and sever it from identity. Against this view, I argue that gender is internalized and does become a dimension of women's identities (Section 1). However, I also urge that the developmental process in childhood and beyond is not merely a process of internalization. It is also a process of individualization. Thus, women's identities are both gendered and individualized. Still, it is important to recognize that individualization

does not fully protect women's agentic capacities from damage. That women's identities are gendered in patriarchal cultures does impede women's ability to function as self-determining agents. Yet, major philosophical accounts of self-determination either underestimate the seriousness of internalized oppression or address this problem in ways that underrate women's agency within patriarchal societies (Section 2). In my view, then, feminist theory needs a different approach to self-determination.

A number of feminists have begun the project of reconceptualizing self-determination by developing what I call feminist voice theory (Section 3). Feminist work on the relation between speaking in one's own voice and leading one's own life is invaluable, for it calls attention to culturally entrenched narrative templates and representational conventions - figures of speech, mythic tales, and pictorial images — that invade women's stories and crowd out alternative versions of their lives. Still, feminist voice theory fails to furnish an epistemology that differentiates speaking in one's own voice from speaking in the patriarch's voice. Thus, I propose an account of self-determination that connects women's voices to their lives as well as to their emancipatory potentialities. Self-determination, I argue, is best understood as an ongoing process of exercising a repertoire of agentic skills -skills that enable individuals to construct their own self-portraits and self-narratives and that thereby enable them to take charge of their lives. Construing self-determination this way demonstrates women's need for expanded agency, for it discloses how patriarchal cultures illegitimately interfere with women's agentic skills (Section 4). However, this view of selfdetermination does not divest women of agency within patriarchal cultures, for it is undeniable that women exercise some agentic skills despite this hostile environment.

1. Internalized Oppression, Identity, and Individuality

People do not choose their gender (or, for that matter, their race, ethnicity, sexuality, stage of life, or class). These are thrust upon us. Nor is it within one's power as an individual to expel gender from one's life. That our society and the people we associate with classify us according to gender is not controversial. Likewise, few would dispute that access to many goods, including social, economic, and political opportunities, differs depending on gender. Yet, in recent feminist theory, a controversy has erupted about whether women have gender identities. Perceiving racism within feminism, women of color object to white, middle-class feminists' universal-

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