

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMAN

Her Cultural and Physical World

Edited by
Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin

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WOMEN'S HISTORY



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The Nineteenth-Century Woman

HER CULTURAL AND PHYSICAL WORLD

Edited by

SARA DELAMONT and LORNA DUFFIN



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This book is dedicated to Cat

1 INTRODUCTION

Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin

This collection of papers has two aims: compatible but not always easily assimilated. We are presenting material on the role and status of women in the nineteenth century which has lain scattered and neglected for many years, and using theoretical insights from social anthropology to illuminate historical material. All the papers contain analyses of important areas of Victorian female experience which have either been untouched by scholars for a considerable period or have been chronicled in an atheoretical and unimaginative way. Thus the collection provides both novel theoretical insights, generated in the main from anthropology and a range of source material not previously available in an accessible form.

The central focus of the book is the relationships perceived between women's bodies and minds in nineteenth-century thought, particularly in the biological and social sciences. Thus there is discussion of physical and mental illness as experienced by Victorian women and the 'cures' propounded by the medical profession for them; of the limits placed by society on women's freedom of movement and thought; and of feminist and anti-feminist attempts to challenge prevailing concepts of illness, health and social convention. Atkinson looks at the role of physical education in nineteenth-century feminist institutions and how this had ramifications for many other aspects of women's lives: dress, leisure, deportment and career prospects. McGuinn's paper concentrates on a relatively unknown piece of work by George Eliot and sets it in a wider context: Eliot's life, philosophical and social ideas, and the climate in which she lived and wrote, are discussed in depth, with an emphasis on the developing feminist campaigns of the nineteenth century. The two papers by Duffin develop themes present in the work of Atkinson and McGuinn. The first paper deals with women in medicine and medical science's views of women. The second is mainly concerned with social scientific ideas about women and their potential. Finally, the two papers by Delamont show the complexities of feminist and anti-feminist thought on education. Material from both the USA and the UK shows that the feminists in education had to operate in a restricting and complex social environment in which the concept of 'the lady' and the ideal of

the saintly mother were enshrined and difficult to alter. The emphases in all these papers are placed on understanding the context in which the nineteenth-century feminists operated and on theorising about it. The remainder of this introduction outlines some of the theoretical ideas which form the common framework for the papers.

Muted Models

Since the late 1960s when the 'new feminism' began with the women's movement in the USA, one important strand of it has been specifically *feminist* scholarship. While the nineteenth century produced many distinguished women scholars, such as Jane Harrison, and scholarly books on women, most learned women concentrated on mastering the male world of scholarship, not on challenging it. In contrast, the new feminist movement has, from its inception, produced a desire for a specifically feminist angle on many of the existing academic disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences. This desire has produced a range of feminist anthologies in literature, in history, in political science, in sociology, in psychology, in education, and in social anthropology. These have serviced both courses in women's studies and options on women in mainstream courses. Perhaps ironically, what has *not* happened is a cross-fertilisation of these new patterns of scholarship. Feminists in literature do not seem to have been influenced by feminists in political science and vice versa. Similarly, feminist history, one of the most thriving of the areas, does not seem to have drawn inspiration from other areas of feminist scholarship such as anthropology. Indeed the Americans writing history about women seem to have accepted many Freudian ideas in an uncritical way which takes little account of the feminist critiques of the psycho-analytic tradition! In this collection of papers we want to try to use some of the analytic tools of social anthropology to scrutinise historical data.

The particular anthropological idea which we use to illuminate historical data derives from the writings of Shirley and Edwin Ardener.¹ The ultimate legitimisation of the approach we have adopted is the work of Durkheim, as transmitted via Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and the French tradition of cerebral anthropology; which is best known in the English-speaking world through the works of Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas. The tradition, an Anglicised version of French structuralism, derives, like anthropology itself, from the Victorian bourgeois social theory which is the central focus of much of this book. It may seem contrary to use the ideas of the Victorian period to re-analyse that period, yet we hope to show that modern developments

in anthropology are very illuminating when applied to the nineteenth-century's social and biological ideas. Certainly it seems to us much more appropriate than the naïve Freudianisms which characterise much American 'herstory'.

The first factor which attracts us to the use of recent anthropological work as a source of illumination for historical data is the subtlety of the Ardeners' use of dominant and muted groups, rather than a simple model of male oppression, as an explanatory device. This argument can be used with profit to analyse aspects of Victorian female experience.

Shirley Ardener has expressed the ideas of dominant and muted groups in the following way. It is argued that every group in a society generates and shares common models of society and of sections of society, so that, for example, Victorian bourgeois women shared a model of bourgeois society, and a model of middle-class women, plus models of servants' worlds, proper schools and so on. However, Victorian males of the middle classes also had their models of these things, and because of the way society was structured, it was the men's models which, if any discrepancies existed, were sure to predominate. As Ardener argues:

a society may be dominated or overdetermined by the model (or models) generated by one dominant group within the system. This dominant model may impede the free expression of alternative models of their world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may even inhibit the very generation of such models. Groups dominated in this sense find it necessary to structure their world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones.²

The Ardeners have suggested that women typically form such a muted, inarticulate group, but there may be others, formed or defined by criteria other than sex. Gypsies, deviants and the young may be seen as good examples of such muted groups. The argument so far has considerable similarities with ideas about the 'marginality' of female adolescents³ and Kraditor's discussion of 'spheres',⁴ but we argue that it has more potential for depth and subtlety. The concept of the model as used by Ward, Douglas and the Ardeners is capable of great sophistication.⁵

Thus, models are said to exist at different levels of consciousness and generality. The Ardeners suggest that while both dominant and muted groups probably generate ideas of social reality at deep levels, the ideas

of the dominant group so blanket the surface of everyday life that the muted group is likely to find its generation of surface ideas inhibited by the blanket coverage. It is not clear quite how muted groups adjust to the dislocation between their deep models and the surface models of the dominant group, but it is argued that they will learn to express their own deepest ideas in terms of the dominant group's surface ideas. Thus a muted group transforms 'their own unconscious perceptions into such conscious ideas as will accord with those generated by the dominant group'.⁶ Such transformations may require the investment of 'a great deal of disciplined mental energy'. This expenditure of energy may well explain the conservative nature of many muted groups' world views: their attachment to models which leave them at a disadvantage. For as Shirley Ardener argues, it is not surprising if people cling to a dearly-won accommodation and fear the prospect of a fresh start.

Ardener argues that studies of the position of women frequently illustrate how women are placed in an inferior category in the predominant system of a given society compared to the men of the society. However, even after the relative position of women in the structure has been documented and established, there is another fruitful area for research. This is the whole topic of the unclear, vague, and probably repressed alternative theories which women have about the world, and, perhaps even more interesting, about themselves. It is these, and the relationships between them and the dominant ideologies, which form the topics for the chapters in this book.

In particular we stress two themes: the ways in which women used the dominant ideas to obtain their own ends and the harsh fact that in order to make their ideas known women had to articulate them in a form which was acceptable to men. While we all argue that sex was one factor which shaped the relationships between men and women, and between male and female models, in nineteenth-century Britain, all the papers also mention other central factors, such as class, scientific beliefs, and population pressures. These other factors are not common to all the papers, and are best discussed where they are relevant, while the concepts of male and female models, women as a muted group, and the use of male models by women, are central to all the papers and are thus the main themes of this introduction.

Ardener argues that the relationships between the deepest — probably unconscious — level of model and the surface structures are an important area for study. The papers in this collection are all addressed to trying to establish some of the complexities which

accompany the transformations between the deep and surface levels of model: the dominant male models of themselves and of women, and the muted female models of society and of women's sphere. We are especially interested in the difficulties experienced by Victorian women in making these transformations, especially when the stirrings of feminism served to complicate the already strained relationship. Again we have developed conceptual frameworks to come to terms with these transformations between male and muted models, frameworks deriving from social anthropology, and inspired in the main by the works of Mary Douglas.

Mary Douglas has published two books and a collection of essays which all attempt to come to terms with the subtleties and ambiguities of human belief systems: especially the relationships between the sacred and the profane, the battle of the sexes, and the nature of religious and secular belief systems.⁷ Her work is fascinating and perplexing, particularly for the non-anthropologist, but the insights make it worth the effort involved in 'mistressing' her material. Unlike Edmund Leach, who has made several ventures into general punditry, Mary Douglas has not written very much about western society or its historical development, but the authors in this collection have taken the liberty of applying her insights far beyond her chosen domain.

The main argument of Douglas's most important book is summarised in her contention that 'dirt is essentially disorder' and 'Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment'.⁸ This effort consists of attempts, practical and ritualistic, to organise the environment and eliminate all forms of dirt: moral and religious as well as physical. In other words, we classify as dirt, as pollution, everything which is out of place. Shoes are not themselves dirty, but they are unhygienic on the table; cigarette ash is all right in the ash tray but not suspended in jelly; nail varnish is pretty on nails but a stain on your best skirt and so forth. As with the physical world, so too with the moral order. A harmless fornication becomes a heinous crime if the partners are later discovered to be siblings; a simple fight becomes parricide if the participants are father and son. It is not the act *itself* which has absolute value, but the social classification of it.

Douglas goes on to develop the basic ideas of order and disorder into a more complex theory about the multitude of ways in which humans impose order on the essential chaos of human and animal life. The world is a complex mass of events and processes which would overwhelm us if we did not divide it up, organise it, catalogue and