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The Conception of Woman in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

MICHAEL W. KAUFMAN

> That reminds me of the old joke about the female soul. Question, Have women a soul? Answer, Yes. Question, Why? Answer, in order that they may be damned.
>
> —Samuel Beckett, *Malloy*

WE ARE VERY MUCH persuaded by historical formulas. The Enlightenment's invention of the Dark Ages still evokes the image of brutish and benighted forces systematically reducing civilization to barbarism. Not surprisingly, one popular conclusion is that medieval women were uniformly subjugated. Such a judgment can not properly be said to have originated at a specific time or place, but seems to have emerged as society moved further away from the Middle Ages. The persistence of this myth of medieval woman's abject subordination is partially attributable to what may be termed the "masculine historical rationalization," which assumes that modern women are much better off when compared with the miserable lot of their

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forebears, and its corollary, the "male argument from progress," which concludes that men are much more enlightened now when compared with the barbaric practices of their ancestors. The more we get ourselves to believe the sexual injustices of the "Dark Ages," the more we are able to persuade ourselves of our own evolutionary progress.

Our image of the Middle Ages is chiefly informed by its literature, but rarely have we questioned its historical validity. This is the "literary fallacy" Bernard DeVoto has written of, the error of assuming that imaginative literature affords a complete and authentic interpretation of an age. As Plato understood, Poetry (and by this term he meant to include all imaginative literature) is feigned history, which is to say it is merely an imitation of an illusion, and for this reason, among others, he regarded literature as suspect. Plato's epistemological dilemmas are no longer compelling, but his critical suspicion of literature is. The creative imagination, like the divine Creator, moves in mysterious ways, and part of that mystery derives from the conscious foreshortening that art's artifice demands. The literary text, we must remind ourselves, is never a precise record of actuality. Even the most rigorous verisimilitude, as the word's etymology suggests, is an aesthetic mode rather than a slice of reality, and once actuality has been refracted through the prism of the artist's imagination we may never be able to sort truth from seeming.

Still, if we take this feigning to involve not only the artist's conscious distortions but his unconscious prejudices as well, we begin to perceive the dangers of formulating the climate of an age through its literary expressions alone. Hippolyte Taine was right to declare that a writer is shaped by his *milieu*. Nevertheless, Taine's conclusion that literature is the collective expression of society fails to account for the unique personal forces which control a writer's attitudes toward the life he portrays. Even the "fixed masterpieces" are idiosyncratic products of particular ways of viewing the world, *fictions* indelibly influenced by variable factors such as class, religion, age, and sex.

During the Middle Ages these unconscious biases were keenly operative. Then, almost without exception, men of letters came from the intellectual aristocracy. The great majority of writers were noblemen or clerks, either monastics or secular scholars attached to cathedral chapters and municipal schools. The intel-

lectual aristocracy was indistinguishable from the social aristocracy. Those who were literate and fluent in Latin were from the leisured upper classes which had the time for an education and the means to afford the costly manuscripts. And then, almost without exception, men of letters were men. Consequently, the medieval literary scene describes a hermetically closed circle: the literati wrote to the literate and this coterie was *homo*geneous in very important ways.

What this means is that the conception of woman revealed in the medieval satires, romances, and lyric poems reflects the attitudes of a very small, male, aristocratic population. This aristocracy, which in England numbered no more than 3% of the population, was far outnumbered by the third estate—freemen and villeins whose duty it was to run the small domestic industries in villages and towns and to work the land. What we discover by comparing the image of woman in the aristocratic literature with the contemporaneous documents and records describing the actual life of the vast third estate is a startling discrepancy between the viciously abusive or patronizingly idealized *literary images* and woman's *actual role* as the greater part of the medieval world understood and accepted her. By the time we come to the sixteenth century the Renaissance had done much to close down that discrepant gap. As the medieval agricultural economy gradually yielded to Tudor mercantile capitalism, and the character of society became pervasively middle class, woman became an economic cipher and social possession. Under the pressures of the expanding middle class and the Reformation ideals her subjection was solidified throughout the class structure. Now the stereotyped literary images more nearly accord with woman's drastically reduced role in society.

II

Within the diversity of medieval literature two dominant and apparently incompatible attitudes toward women may be distinguished. The first attitude finds clear expression in the satires of Jean de Meung and Matheolus and in the clerical writings which first began appearing in profusion during the twelfth century, characterized by vicious, often hysterical misogyny; the second acquires exemplary form in the religious cult of Mariolatry and in its secularized version of chivalric tales and lays of courtly love, written, if not by aristocrats, then for them.

Between them, the clergy and the aristocracy form a kind of fatal antipodes, either cynically debasing woman or blandly idealizing her to opposite poles of the sexual wheel of fortune. No matter how antithetical these literary traditions appear, both eventuate from similar stereotyping imaginations, unable, or more likely, unwilling to accept woman as a complex individual. The clerical writings vilify, the romantic lyrics idealize; but both conventionalize woman beyond the compass of dynamic humanity. The important thing to keep in mind is that both cleric and aristocrat, despite their mutual antagonism, were politically associated; both landed estates were repositories of a conservative ideology and each in its own way attempted to maintain the established balance of power and domination.

Clerical anti-feminism should not at all be surprising since from its origins Christianity had been hostile toward women. Basing their arguments on Genesis and the apostolic theory of woman's inferiority, the Church Fathers insisted that woman was created of man and therefore to serve him; that it was Eve who fell from grace and that initial lapse should teach man that woman's subjection is inherent in the natural scheme. In the Middle Ages clerical misogyny again attained remarkable popularity. St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*—that splendid compendium of Christian ideology—puts the orthodox argument succinctly. "Woman is naturally subject to man because in man the discretion of reason predominates." So natural is this condition, Thomas continues, "that woman is subject by her nature, while a slave is not" (I, q. 92). The notion of female subjection which Aquinas is stating here had by the thirteenth century a long history of evolution behind it. In its essentials it was a legacy from antiquity, but in its virulence and prolixity it had reached a plateau in the previous century.

It is no accident that the recrudescence of anti-feminism coincides with the Church's desperate reform movement instituted by Gregory VII and carried out in England by Anselm. Faced with bitter criticism of the spreading corruption within and threatened by a quickening popular piety without, the Church moved first to keep religious power out of the hands of secular princes, and then to reform clerical behavior in order to mitigate its growing reputation of decadence. To enforce priestly abstinence, Geoffrey, Archbishop of Rouen, went so far as to threaten excommunication to clerics having "commerce with

females of any description." Geoffrey's interdiction was not very successful, but it may serve to illustrate the covert links between the demands for sacerdotal celibacy and the Church's misogyny, for one effect of the Gregorian reforms was the resurgence of ascetic ideals which provided a congenial atmosphere for the Church's reinvigorated anti-feminism. By equating woman with insatiable sexuality, irrationality, and demonic temptation, the clergy embarked on a propaganda campaign. To be sure, the systematic defilement of woman was intended to win the clergy back to celibacy. But additionally, by designating woman as the supreme temptress seducing men to disobedience, clerics were able to take a giant stride toward rationalizing their own moral weakness.

Beneath its theological surface the medieval Church's misogyny reveals a cynical political strategy intended to undermine women's growing influence. Indeed, the frequency and the violence of these attacks attest to the importance of women in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. During the twelfth century, because so many men had joined the crusades, because nunneries were the only alternative for noble women who couldn't or wouldn't marry, because aristocratic women had no other means to satisfy their intellectual aspirations, more noble women than ever before had taken religious orders. Whatever the reasons, the results were that in England alone by the end of the thirteenth century there were 138 nunneries, and prioresses and abbesses were becoming increasingly visible in the church hierarchy and influential in ecclesiastical affairs.

What was even more ominous than the number of women within the Church, however, was the rising tide of influential women attracted to the various heretical pieties and mystical movements which were exerting a mass influence. The Beguines—groups of women who lived and worshiped together, devoting themselves to good works—began in the Low Countries during the twelfth century. Neither the attacks of the Archbishop of Mainz nor Albertus Magnus had been able to suppress them and by the thirteenth century beguinages had spread to most major cities and many communities. Throughout western Europe during the twelfth century centers of mysticism developed which were molding the thought of the population and turning their attention to popular piety. The convent of Helfta produced a succession of female mystics such as Matilda

of Magdeburg, Saint Gertrude the Great, and Saint Mechtild of Hackeborn. And in the Rhineland the Friends of God, led by a Benedictine nun named Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) attracted significant followings and in some instances publicly attacked the male ecclesiastical hierarchy.[1] Whatever problems the mystical pietistic movements addressed, the Church preferred to view them politically—merely as heterodoxies which threatened the masculine ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the misogynic literature churchmen moved under the cloak of religious zeal to solidify their powerful position in medieval society. By emphasizing woman's evil and seductive powers the Church modulated from a theological outlook to a political procedure that had as its pragmatic goal putting woman back in her place.

During the twelfth century, at about the same time as the growing clerical anti-feminism, there arose the rites of courtly love in the coteries of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne. In the classic articulation of this genre the male lover passionately desires an exceedingly beautiful and perfect woman whose emotional aloofness and marital status make her seem hopelessly inaccessible. The lover, despite his frustration, cannot quell his fascination and continues to render faithful service to his high-minded lady. She reciprocates, not by granting him the amorous reward he so desperately craves, but by approving his conduct and reassuring him of his worth. This love ritual, which most scholars now agree does not reflect the mores of actual social conduct,[2] was codified by Andreas Capellanus, himself a court chaplain,[3] and found expression in numerous Provencal lyrics.

While it is true, as A. J. Denomy and others have pointed out, that it is "impossible to reconcile the tenets of courtly love with the commandments of God . . . as interpreted by Saint Paul,"[4] there is a residual spirituality in the amorous cult. The philosophical premise of this literature is that love is a state of the soul, not of the body, and that its satisfaction is genuinely emotional and spiritual, not appetitive.* As a result, the poetry

* Andreas distinguishes between two kinds of love, one pure, the other mixed. It is the pure love which binds together the hearts of the lovers with every feeling of delight. Pure love consists of the contemplation of the mind and the affection of the heart; it goes only so far as the kiss and the embrace between nude lovers, omitting the final solace, for that is not permitted to those who wish to love purely.

and later the codified love rites describe a relation between lady and devotee that had nothing to do with vulgar, trivial, physical satisfactions, and most certainly nothing to do with those socially acknowledged duties such as marriage, domestic cares, procreation, and child-rearing. In these courts of love illicit, adulterous assignations underlay the relationship, and the object was preeminently the male lover's spiritual ascension; inspired by the lady's beauty and nobility, he becomes ennobled in beneficence, valor, and worth—what a later generation was to call *cortezia.* Woman as the idealized incarnation of beauty, as the object of contemplation, as the springboard for man's spiritual ascension, these are the conceptual foci of this genre.

What is generally recognized and often rehearsed about feudal aristocratic society is that marriage was a brutally pragmatic contract of economic and class advancement which in almost every case favored the male. It was imperative for a nobleman, a knight, or even a young aspirant to knighthood to marry for status and property. Since marriage was an institutionalized means of upward social mobility, women were frequently "sold" to the lower nobility or urban aristocracy or, in extreme cases, to the wealthier strata of the peasantry. In this state of hypogamy, with each downward step on the social ladder the woman would inherit the inferior status of her husband. Consequently marriage satisfied neither her romantic aspirations nor her desire for social mobility, and early in the twelfth century, as contemporary chronicles, sermons and satires indicate, the institution of marriage began to break down and adulterous liaisons proliferated.

It should be clear from such a social context that the courtly love literature was fundamentally a fanciful rebelliousness. In a society in which aristocratic women were deprived of their individuality, denied even the satisfactions of romantic fulfillment or social ascendancy, the literary cult of illicit love acted as an imaginative displacement, undermining only in its fictions the patriarchal dominance of feudal society. The inverted mythology in which the woman becomes the dominating lord and the man plays the enslaved vassal is the creation of fantasy.*

* In so much of the courtly poetry the lady seems all-powerful; she is the lord; the lover is her "vassal" or "man." Guiraut de Bornelh complains of his lady's cruelty and wishes he were blest with a "good lord." Bernart

In the literature the women harmlessly revenged themselves on their men, who, in turn, generously allowed them to gratify their sexual and social inclinations in lyric fantasies spun with the utmost detail around their superiority; as one twelfth-century commentator remarked: "the ladies enjoy being constantly wooed, and find it so gratifying to deny."

In this sort of fantasizing no one is seriously threatened, and the mock subversion of reality reflects more the impossibility of actual subversion than anything else. But there is still a more serious aspect to courtly literature. For a class that depended so strongly upon legitimate offspring upon whom the feudal estates could be legally bestowed in unbroken patrilinear descent, the rising incidence of adultery and illegitimacy had to be controlled. Thus the illicit and frankly sensual impulses of this amorous literature served to create a sublimating buffer displacing extramarital passions to ritual rather than reality.

III

If the preponderance of medieval literature polarizes woman either to sinful sensuality or spiritual sublimity, the impression gained from the contemporaneous documents—gild by-laws, legal proceedings, bishops' records and a few extant family letters—is that women of the third estate—what John of Salisbury described as "the feet of the Commonwealth"—enjoyed a practical equality. Among the upper ranks, feudal ties of vassalage dictated human relations. Since these institutions depended exclusively on military and political services, the business and interest of the feudal hierarchy were exclusively masculine and the important relations were corporate. But where people are bound to the soil in the static agrarian world, mobility and the social prestige that attaches to power were not real possibilities for most. What was real, however, was a closely knit extended kinship structure among the lower classes that existed as the dominant matrix for individual relationships.[5]

de Ventadorn declares, "I am your vassal pledged and sworn," and Andreas asserts that the lover is always "the servant and friend and slave to his lady." See Sidney Painter, *French Chivalry: Chivalric Ideas and Practices in Medieval France* (London, 1940), p. 106: "The Noblewoman was completely subject to her husband, . . . but in the literary conventions of chivalric and courtly love she was not her lord's inferior, but equal to or superior."

Thus while the aristocracy forged an extensive land-holding economy and a social system which maximized sexual division of labor, most of the population owned little and depended on communal relations for their sustenance.

These socio-economic factors demanded that the lower classes develop "a greater sense of the normal personality of woman than . . . either the aristocracy or the church."[6] Simone de Beauvoir concludes that "common interest brought [husband and wife] together and raised the wife to the rank of companion. . . . Husband and wife lived on a footing of equality in small rural communities among fellow laborers. In free labor woman found a real autonomy because she played an economic and social part of real importance."[7] In the villages where there was no strict division of labor women worked the fields side by side with men; in towns and cities where handicrafts and domestic industries persisted through the fifteenth century, manufacturing and merchandizing of foods were still essentially carried out at home. Simply put, for most of the medieval world the economic life was an integral part of the household; the family was the productive economic unit and all were partners in the business of survival.

Because the feudal structure was so literally homocentric, dominated by the warrior aristocrat, the preservation of masculine military power was crucial to its survival. By the eleventh century, as fiefs were becoming hereditary, the aristocracy developed the rule of primogeniture, the descent of property to the eldest male. Primogeniture applied to all feudal land, for its principal purposes were to avoid the breakup of the family patrimony, to further the concentration of wealth, and to keep strategic and lucrative military fiefs in male hands.[8] In the shires and townships, by contrast, where feudal military power was not an influential factor, inheritance was more a matter of family relationships. Among these lower classes, as G. C. Homans points out, "the immediate family was favored at the expense of . . . the aristocratic tradition of descent in the strict male line."[9]

Even more impressive are the juridical distinctions that existed between classes. While aristocratic women were considered minors at best, chattel at worst, women of the third estate were accorded markedly better treatment before the law. An undisputed formula of the feudal tradition, embodied in the

emerging common law of the twelfth century, decreed that women could not marry without the consent of their lord and that the wife should be subject to her husband's will. According to Plantagenet law women could not testify in court except in cases where a husband was murdered in the wife's presence or in cases of rape. But those juridicial records that cover petitions and actions before the King's curia and administrative officers—that body of borough law that was to become Equity in the sixteenth century—lower-class women actively protected their legal rights to property ownership and frequently won disputes with their husbands. In their monumental *History of the English Law,* Pollock and Maitland reveal this significant discrepancy between the feudal legal codes and the actual practices among the middle and lower classes. "Canon law," they write, "gives woman no rights and exacts from her no duties save that of paying taxes and performing such services as can be performed by Deputy. Private law, with few exceptions, put women on a par with men."[10] And they conclude:

> We cannot even within the sphere of property law explain the marital relationship among the citizenry as being simply the subjection of the wife to her husband's will. He constantly needs her concurrence, and the law takes care that she shall have an opportunity of freely refusing her assent to his acts. To this we must add that . . . there is a latent idea of community between husband and wife which cannot be suppressed or ignored.[11]

The argument that the medieval woman of the third estate shared the crucial decision-making processes of her economic and social existence is strengthened by the few extant records of the gild proceedings. In a volume of original documents published by the Early English Text Society, the nineteenth-century historian Toulmin Smith accumulated a wealth of material reflecting what he quaintly called the ancient practice of communal association that existed among the common folk which had "always worked well till forcibly meddled with."[12] All the documents are from 1389, when Richard II's parliament called upon "every brethern and sistern in every shire of England" to report on the nature, governance, and practices of their gilds.

Of the five hundred gilds that responded only five were not composed both of men and women. (Only two gilds listed their membership rolls by name, and in one instance there were

more women than men). Most of the gilds were social organizations whose primary function was preparing for and participating in the feast days. In these cases women's participation is not surprising. But even in the religious gilds where affairs were managed by priests, women were admitted as lay members. Occasionally, as in the case of the Hull gild of the Blessed Virgin and the Gild of Corpus Christi, women helped to found the organization. Most significantly, of the eighty-five gilds of craft most admitted women, allowing them equal opportunities and applying to them equal penalties that the by-laws prescribed: they elected officers and participated in feast days, and could be sued for debts and punished for misdeeds. Several of those craft gilds that did not originally accept women made exceptions for widows whose husbands had been gild-brothers. In other gilds there seems to have been legitimate reasons why women were excluded, usually connected with the nature of the occupation. The Young Scholars, for example, were probably studying for the priesthood; the shipmen, smiths, and cordwainers engaged in very strenuous physical work.

The important position that women held in Southern European societies of the eleventh century has been described by Herliby.[13] Eileen Power has this to say of the freedom afforded women traders and the *femma sole,* and describes the degree of independence lower-class women experienced:

> A glance at any manorial "extent" will show women villeins and cotters living upon their little holdings and rendering the same services for them as men; some of these are widows, but many of them are obviously unmarried. . . . Women performed almost every kind of agricultural labour, with the exception of the heavy business of ploughing. They often acted as thatcher's assistants, and on many manors they did the greater part of sheep-shearing, while the care of the dairy and of the small poultry was always in their hands.[14]

In the towns women also possessed a degree of economic independence and were crucial to the growing cloth industries:

> Of the five hundred crafts scheduled in Étienne Boileau's *Livre des Métiers* in medieval Paris, at least five were their monopoly, and in a large number of others women were employed as well as men. . . . In all the great cloth-working districts, Florence, the Netherlands, England, women are to be found carrying out the preliminary processes of the manufacture. Spinning was, indeed, the regular occupation of all women and the "spinster's" habitual

> means of support . . . Other food-producing and textile industries were also largely practised by them, and domestic services provided a career for many.[15]

The women of London were known to be engaged in at least a hundred different occupations; they were master craftswomen, teachers, doctors, and merchants. *The Calendar of Letter Books* mentions women barbers, apothecaries, armorers, shipwrights, tailors, spurriers, and water-bearers. This is not to say that the Middle Ages was a period of idyllic sexual parity; but the facts do suggest that women of the lower estates did have a relatively free and creative scope for expression due in large measure to their productive contributions in the social and economic world.

Their aristocratic counterparts fared very differently, however. They were excluded, of course, from the military and political affairs of the feudal hierarchy, and rarely attained the honorific power positions of their society. Because noblemen were exclusively responsible for acquiring honor and wealth, their women were drastically inferior, their fortunes and labor legally and customarily accepted as belonging to the men. And since the aristocracy depended on property as the continuing symbol of status, its women became the primary vehicle for male status climbing, the means to the end of maintaining name and inheritance intact. But as the economic basis of society gradually began to shift during the later Middle Ages the emerging middle classes gave evidence of aping their betters. Of this tendency the Ménagier de Paris is the presiding spirit. The book he addressed to his child bride provides ample proof of how the women of the *haute bourgeoisie* were becoming social ornaments and fixtures in the home. Without a functional role in the labor force, the upperclass woman no longer counted, and an early consequence of this new attitude was that she became merely a domestic slave and a reproductive agent.

IV

The forces that gave rise to the Renaissance radically transformed most aspects of English economic and social life. The change from an agrarian community to an urban marketplace helped to accelerate and extend woman's subjugation. The enclosure movement, for example, which allowed rich landlords

to appropriate common pasture lands for sheep grazing, left thousands without land to cultivate. The bankrupted yeomanry were forced to migrate to the cities, creating a prodigious surplus of labor for England's fledgling industries. Similarly, the decline of domestic industries took manufacturing and trade out of the home and village and brought commerce under the efficient, centralized authority of a relatively small but powerful class of merchants. As a result of the surplus force of yeomen and the drastic constriction of manufacturing women became economically expendable; as a competitive threat to masculine employment they were among the first to be exiled to the periphery of this new mercantile world.

The same changes that had weakened the medieval village economy worked to transform the structure of family life as well. As mercantile capitalism with its emphasis on private property and individual acquisition destroyed the fabric of the medieval community, so the nuclear family, advocating privacy and self-sufficiency, replaced the extended kinship unit. And it was the nuclear family that proved to be the bastion of the patriarchal ideology, serving as a conservative counter to the otherwise liberalizing spirit of the age. The nuclear family, Benjamin De Mott has written, was the achievement of the middle class, but it was accomplished at a very great price. By fostering the individualism of the family it simultaneously destroyed the forms of connectedness and signaled the end of open communication among generations and classes.[16] Whether the nuclear family destroyed human solidarity is questionable, but it seems safe to assume that it did drastically reduce woman's role in society. Now her former economic and social responsibilities, which had helped sustain the entire medieval community, were confined to the home.

In the Protestant revolution the bourgeoisie found their natural ally. Protestantism shaped and was shaped by the material needs of the new economic order. Reformation leaders vigorously asserted the rights of private property, dignified hard work, and glorified the activities of business. If Calvin preached a grim doctrine of election, the English middle class ingeniously assimilated it into their *Weltanschauung*, rationalizing wealth and success as the visible signs of salvation. The same spirit of Protestantism sanctified the bourgeoisie's effort to keep woman in the home. For middle class men busily accumulating material

goods and worrying about the means to perpetuate them, procreation was essential for procuring an heir, and chastity necessary to ensure its legitimacy. Thus did German and English religious reformers lead the general Protestant assault on the Catholic doctrine of celibacy. They publicly championed marriage as a worthy human institution and divine sacrament intended to bring forth children. While they exalted marriage, however, middle-class writers and Reformation preachers still retained the Catholic themes of woman's weakness and irresponsibility. But they employed them no longer merely to stress her moral weakness, but to justify their argument that woman is man's subordinate and her proper sphere the home.

During the last quarter of the sixteenth century a flood of domestic conduct books treated the problems of family government and good housekeeping.[17] The themes attracted some of the best minds of Europe; men like Agrippa, Erasmus, Vives, and Bullinger published their versions of the ideal household. Thomas Becon's *Book of Matrimonye,* published in England in 1561,[18] is typical of the genre. Like countless other writers of domestic treatises, Becon insists that the foremost duty of the husband and wife is to beget children. Becon defines the husband's duties as provision and defense, assigning to the wife obedience and fidelity. Geoffrey Fenton agrees with Becon that the husband's special authority is to govern, and goes on the describe the wife "as the inferior part of her husband [who] is therefore subject to all dutiful obedience on his behalf, and bound to honor him with no worse terms than by the name of lord and master."[19] Fenton's description of the husband as master and the wife as servant makes explicit the profound role differentiation and sexual hierarchy the bourgeois family nurtured. It was the man who busied himself accumulating wealth and acquiring honor while his woman remained at home thriftily hoarding his riches and rearing his heirs. The specific details of this division of labor may be found in numerous Renaissance marital handbooks, but nowhere is the idea expressed in such vivid terms as in Henrie Smith's remarkable barnyard analogy:

> The husband is the cocke and the wife is the dam: the cocke flieth abroad to bring in, and the dam sitteth upon the nest to keep all at home. For the man's pleasure is most abroad and the woman's within.[20]

The very fact that so many treatises on family governance were produced, and in such a formulaic way that they create a convention, attests to the general acceptance of this division of labor. Such an unequal delegation of responsibility created a situation in which women were forced to rely exclusively on their husbands. In practical terms this dependency meant that she had no alternative but to accept her husband's supervision and authority.

The condescension of Renaissance writers toward women is so palpable that it seems surprising when we remember that their monarch was a queen. Elizabeth's daily presence must have created some tensions and not a little embarrassment to the masculine apologists. Because of her accomplished leadership and her fabled erudition, the successful military expeditions she authorized, her bold backing of Drake and Raleigh and the voyages of exploration, and her crafty handling of a recalcitrant court, Elizabeth embodied, however uneasily, the epitome of Renaissance *virtù*; she was a living example of the "great man." But as career woman and virgin Elizabeth was an affront to masculine sensibilities, and her vanity and growing paranoia seemed royal examples of feminine irrationality. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first two decades of her reign produced the most prolific rash of satires on woman's frailities in the history of that sub-genre.[21] Nor is it hard to understand why Elizabeth's successor, James I, despised women and wanted them back in the home.

Now surely these are generalizations; England did not awaken one day to find the Renaissance dawning outside, nor did the middle class suddenly rear its head in the sixteenth century. The change in woman's position is gradual and the historiographic problems must be obvious here. But what I think is clear is that between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries fundamental changes were taking place in the social structure of English life, and that to a very great extent these changes were the result of a radical economic transformation from the medieval primary economy to the Renaissance money economy. For my purpose, this shift meant a more restricted and subjugated position for women. With the high priority the middle class placed on ascending status and accumulating wealth, and the axiomatic obsession with lineage and unbroken familial dynasty, the majority of Renaissance women became glorified

domestic managers and procreative functionaries. Now, in a much more ubiquitous way than it had been in medieval culture, sexism was part of the entire caste structure. Middle-class writers took over from the depleted clergy in proclaiming woman's inferiority, stressing her pride, fickleness, irrationality, and extravagance. Or they took to praising marital bliss and exhorting woman to fulfill her "divine" function to procreate. In either case bearing and rearing children and efficiently maintaining the home were her "natural" tasks in the bourgeois ideology.

V

English Renaissance literature is incredibly rich and diverse, perhaps the greatest efflorescence of the human imagination in Western civilization. Despite its rich diversity, however, its underlying and consistent conception of woman is not much different from that of the Middle Ages: she is still an object, either of spiritual contemplation or of sexual subservience. The dramatic polarities of these attitudes are clearly expressed in two of the dominating modes of Elizabethan love poetry. The first is the Petrarchan lyric, where the Neoplatonized cult of love parallels the medieval courtly romancers' spiritual apotheosis of woman. The second is Ovidian erotic poetry, "bordered with bulls and swans," following the Latin poet in deploying Olympian myths, giving a sort of divine embellishment to the delicious joys of sexual union, all the while extolling the libertine credo that women were made for men's pleasure and describing the sure and easy success of a man with a maid. Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander," one of the best poems in this tradition, provides an ironic perspective on the coy, chaste mistress of the sonnets as well as an unusual insight into the nature of pastoral pleasures:

> And then he wooed with kisses, and at last
> As shepherds do, her on the ground he laid,
> And tumbling into the grass, he often strayed
> Beyond the bounds of shame, in being bold
> To eye those parts which no eye should behold.

No extended analysis of the sexual attitudes implicit in this kind of poetry is necessary; the Renaissance Ovidian poems exist in the same tradition as the medieval *pastourelle,* where the actors were not shepherds and shepherdesses but chevaliers

and peasant girls. Except that the characteristic wit and metric energy is lacking, this medieval *pastourelle* could be Marlowe's:

When my wooing brought me nought
On the ground I laid her straight,
Lifted up her pretty dress
And seeing her white nakedness
Burned all the more
And taught her love's lore;
Nor did she say me nay
But delighted in the play.

The *carpe diem* seduction theme which appears in exemplary ways in Renaissance poems otherwise as diverse as "The Shepherd's Complaint," "Venus and Adonis," "Delia," "Gather Ye Rosebuds," and "To a Coy Mistress," poems we usually anthologize and read quite apart from their attitudinal context, maximizes the notion of woman as a sexual function and, as Marlowe's wry wit makes clear, reduces her to a pastoral nymph.

But to the former poetic convention—the Elizabethan sonnet and its so-called Renaissance Platonism—let me make some passing remarks. It was Marsilio Ficino, grand scholar of the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who first translated Plato into Latin and saw the potential bridge between the two irreconcilable notions of love popular during the Middle Ages, the one an adulterous love of a beautiful woman, the other the ascetic, spiritually uplifting love of God untainted by physical passions. The way Ficino understood the *Symposium* was that love was a progression from the body to the soul, the physical to the spiritual, the natural to the divine; a constant ascension from mundane beauty to heavenly Beauty. And within Ficino's paradigm of a Platonized ladder, woman constituted a rung. Her essential value, indeed her *raison d'etre,* was her symbolic function as a *thing* of beauty, to borrow Keats' phrase.

In England this Neoplatonism, acquired through Dante, Petrarch, and Ronsard, found its way into numerous sonnets in the last decade of the sixteenth century. The best of these sonnet sequences, like Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella,* developed the poet's dramatic struggle between promptings of sexual fulfillment and yearnings for spiritual purity. At the ideational center of the sequence was a Stella, Celia, Delia, or Lesbia—that idealized lady, the abstract of all virtues: meekness, constancy, beauty, and, of course, chastity. Lyrically, the golden-haired, white-

skinned, ruby-lipped, long-necked, slope-shouldered lady* was the center; but dramatically and essentially the singer and not the lady was the single object of investigation. It is he who enjoys singular autonomy, expropriating all the interest himself. If Astrophel expresses sincerity and promises to look into his heart before writing, that sincerity is reflexive, concerned only with his own emotional turmoil. Trapped between passionate desire and moral compunctions, Astrophel is invested with the complexities and ambivalences of a living creature, capable of making choices, tortured by that very necessity, while Stella remains a shadowy abstraction condemned to a marmoreal imprisonment within the sexual and literary conventions that rigidly define her. The conventional roles in the Elizabethan sonnet contribute to define feminity as passive and simplistic, while masculinity emerges dynamic and complex. In the hands of lesser poets the sonnet becomes simply the occasion for measuring masculine vitality, a self-reflexive, onanistic self-aggrandizement: Daniel's Delia, not surprisingly, is almost an anagram of his own name.

The single literary work of this period which comes closest to expressing the predominating conceptions of woman is Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew,* written during the height of the popular controversy over women. *The Shrew* is a play about marriage, middle-class style. It is the men who as traders at the market place, in the vocabulary of commercial transactions, bicker over the purchase of their women, and once concluding their business claim their exclusive possession. Petruchio, who announces that he has come "to wive it wealthily" in Padua, negotiates with Baptista over Katherine's dowry (II.i.114-27) and, having settled the obligatory economic matters, legitimately exercises his rights of private property. "I will be master of what is my own," Petruchio warns Katherine, and then reminds the wedding guests that "she is my goods, my chattels; she is my house, my horse, my ox, my ass, my anything!" (III.ii.225-27). Petruchio's words serve as a forcible reminder of the weight

* These catalogues itemizing the lady's charms quickly petrified into conventional expression. The *graphie* which started at her hair and terminated at her feet provided a topographical map of the lady of surprising detail. Shakespeare's sonnets to the "dark lady," particularly the one beginning "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," depend on this convention for their ironic effect.

of authority behind the possessive attitude toward women which they express. The removal of woman from the home of her family and her transferral to the home of the man whose domesticated servant she becomes is embodied in the ceremony anthropologists call "purchase of the right." Such an economic transaction and woman's subsequent domestic reification—akin to the purchase of cattle, from which the word chattel etymologically derives—is the foundation of the patriarchal family, the fundamental institution upon which male supremacy is based.

What is so striking about *The Shrew* is Shakespeare's careful juxtaposition of two radically conflicting attitudes toward courtship and domestic relations. Petruchio's brutally practical sense of marriage as an economic merger and an efficient business throws sharp contrast on the subplot where a triad of idealizing suitors elevate Bianca to a romantic pedestal. The different impulses between the courtships lead with the sureness of inevitability to the drastically differing results of the marital relationships, stressing with a puritanical didacticism the constant opposition between romantic idealizing and conjugal partnership. Romantic love may be an emotionally compelling passion, but it has little to do with the practical business of getting on in the world*; indeed, it is bound to distort the proper order of a household.

Although *The Shrew* is primarily a play that extols the middle-class marriage of convenience, it is also interesting as a redaction of two long-held masculine myths about woman: the Shrew and the Patient Griselda. Whatever their precise origin, probably going back to the contrast between Penelope and Clytemnestra in Greek literature, these feminine stereotypes emerged from the medieval satires on the sex, representing two aspects of the *querelle des femmes*. The meek, submissive Griselda epitomized the ideal of proper masculine dominance and wifely obedience, while the Shrew didactically served to present the consequences of "unnatural" domestic relations.

* Juliet Mitchell, "The Longest Revolution," *New Review* (Nov.-Dec., 1966), p. 15. Mitchell points out that monogamy precedes the idea of love in Western culture. "The two [notions] have subsequently been officially harmonized, but the tension between them has never been abolished. There is a formal contradiction between the voluntary, contractual character of 'marriage' and the spontaneous, uncontrollable character of 'love'—the passion that is celebrated precisely for its involuntary force." This seems to be the effect of the plot juxtaposition in *The Shrew*.

Shakespeare's singular achievement was to recognize the inherent comedy in bringing these conventional types together and, perhaps even more importantly, to present the Shrew and the Griselda as merely two related creations of male-dominated society.†

From the outset of the play, when Baptista attempts to auction Katherine in marriage, Shakespeare underscores the seemingly radical difference between the Minola sisters. In dramatic contrast with Katherine's unnatural aggressiveness, Bianca has the natural attributes of meekness and passivity traditionally associated with the patient Griselda. In her acquiescence to her father's will Hortensio sees a "jewel"; and in her silence Lucentio finds "a maid's mild behavior and sobriety." Together the sisters represent opposite extremes of the created order. Katherine is persistently equated with the subnatural and the devilish; Bianca exists on the supranatural level of the gods: in her speech Lucentio hears the wisdom of Minerva, and in her face sees the beauty of Lena. But, of course, the character contrast is only apparent, preparing for the stunning reversal of the last scene, where the shrewish Katherine emerges meek and obedient and the mild Bianca reveals her domestic rebellion.

Thus the subplot relates to the main plot as a cautionary warning. Precisely from the way that Petruchio tames the unnatural Katherine and creates the perfectly natural submissive wife, we are meant to understand how it is that the idolizing lovers of the subplot transform Bianca from a meek and dutiful daughter to a whimsical mistress, and then disastrously into an unnatural shrew. And the consequences of Bianca's metamorphosis are appropriately realized in her double act of disobedience: her clandestine marriage without her father's consent, and her rebellious assertion of independence, which costs Lucentio 100 marks. The lesson is brought home to the middle-class audience: allow your women liberty, worship them with lavish praise, let authority and control lapse, and they will return such unnaturalness in kind.

† Although there are many plays that employ these conventional feminine stereotypes singly, Shakespeare seems to have been the first to combine them. Only after the appearance of *The Shrew* do the two stock figures appear in the same play. Dekker's *The Honest Whore* and Dekker, Chettle, Haughton's *The Patient Grissel* combine these motifs and are both obviously indebted to Shakespeare.

Petruchio, under no such dangerous delusions, shrewdly embarks on the alternate course to curb Katherine's "spirit to resist" by demonstrating her proper position in the domestic order. For behind Petruchio's taming is his insistence on a marital relation that mirrors the natural order of the created universe. With the zany logic appropriate to the play, Petruchio's taming culminates when he forces Katherine to concede to an unnatural reversal in the cosmic order (the sun is the moon) and in the human order (age is youth). Farcical as it may seem, Petruchio's taming is based on a very serious and acceptable premise for the men in this audience. By inverting the domestic, social, and cosmic hierarchies Petruchio has succeeded in teaching Katherine that her own shrewish rebellion is in direct contradiction with the way things ought to be.

In the last scene when Lucentio and Hortensio stare in wonder at their wives' willful refusal to obey their bidding, Petruchio explains to them and to us the significance of Katherine's newbuilt virtue and obedience:

> peace it bodes, and love, and quiet life
> An awful rule and right supremacy.
> And to be short, what not, that's sweet and happy.

So says Petruchio, and his formula of "awful rule and right supremacy" would have been recognized by the contemporary audience as consonant with what their preachers, pamphleteers, and writers of domestic conduct books had been saying for the last quarter-century. Over and over again these middle-class advocates of the perfect marriage warned that both partners must heed their prescribed duties and obligations. In his sermon "A Preparative for Marriage," Henrie Smith warned his parishioners that "marriage is called Conjugium which signifieth a knitting or joyning of duties." And the wife's first duty is "to be content and to be ruled and governed by her husband."[22] Because, Tasso would have added, "A woman that conformes herself to her husband is adorned with those virtues whereof being obstinate she continueth unfurnished."[23] Bishop Hall stressed the husband's power over the wife but cautioned that men should not use that authority too tyrannically, and that the language of Corinthians—"Their wives are their slaves; this is not for the women to have power on their head, but for the men to have power on the body"—should not be taken liter-

ally.[24] And William Gouge, employing the popular metaphor of the ordered society as a bee hive, concluded that a well-ordered home is a lively representation of Church, Commonwealth, and Cosmos.[25]

Katherine's last long speech presents this view of wifely submission. It is worth noting, however, that in the original source for Shakespeare's play* Katherine had attributed her obedience to mental, moral, and biological inferiority. Shakespeare's Katherine capitulates simply because women are "the weaker vessels." Because of woman's "soft condition," the husband is obliged to endure painful labors, and in return for this loving guidance the wife owes him her obedience, actually "too little payment for so large a debt." But whether the argument is based on mental, spiritual or biological grounds, the fact remains that Renaissance attitudes toward women, so clearly presented in *The Taming of the Shrew,* were principally based on the natural exchange of male protection and guidance for female helplessness. *The Taming of the Shrew* is at once a masculine vision of nightmare and fantasy. Rebelliousness in woman is unnatural, for it undermines the masculine laws of nature; conversely, the measure of a good woman is the measure of her wifely submissiveness.

VI

What I have attempted to trace is the drastic restriction of woman's once integral position in the economic and social milieu. During the Middle Ages, when the village and the home were centers of important activities, women were busy, important, and relatively powerful. Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries the majority of women were systematically denied the legal and customary liberties they had formerly experienced, until the spread of mercantile capitalism and the coalescence of Reformation and bourgeois ideology successfully isolated her within the domestic household. The role structures

* I refer here to the play *The Taming of a Shrew* which for a long while was considered Shakespeare's source. In recent years speculation has arisen concerning whether *A Shrew* is merely a memorial reconstruction or a bad quarto of Shakespeare's play, or whether it was written later and based on *The Shrew.* The chronology and the degree of Shakespeare's indebtedness are not at issue here. The important fact is that Shakespeare's Katherine argues from different grounds than the analogous character in *A Shrew.*

of society had shifted and woman's fundamental function had been transformed from production to reproduction.[26]

That woman's domesticity meant her total subjection is hardly disputable. When she was restricted to the home, what physical strength she was capable of atrophied, thus ensuring the fragile, delicate creatures about whom it was then possible to argue that they were not physically fit for "masculine work." By legally declaring her the husband's ward, woman was deprived of her individuality before the law and hence her rights as civil society defines those rights. But most significantly, by substituting the Reformation ideal of chastity within marriage for the Roman Church's apotheosis of virginity, the middle class manifestly attempted to use its women as vehicles, the means of transporting its familial dynasties and property rights down succeeding generations while still maintaining legitimacy and honor in a caste-conscious society.* This is why the cuckold and the shrew are ubiquitous figures in Renaissance literature. The cuckold's fate evokes the cardinal crime in this society: a breach of obedience, piety, and fidelity in marriage which seriously threatens the *status quo*. In the figure of the shrew the middle class had come full circle in secularizing the former clerical anti-feminism. In her deviation from accepted beliefs, in her obdurate refusal to submit to masculine authority, the shrew is a heretic whose treason must either be renounced or be stamped out.

This is also why the tamed Shrew or the patient Griselda became one of the major archetypes of the ideal woman in western literature. Her virtues—obedience, modesty, compliance, passivity, gentleness, timidity, silence, deference, willingness to do humble tasks, eagerness to please—these are the virtues proper to subordination, and feminine subordination is proper to the natural order. Thus the ideal woman possesses all the attributes of the ideal servant, and by binding this servant

* Even as procreative agent Renaissance theorists allowed woman no untarnished glory. For if the Church reminded people that child bearing was woman's penance for original sin, sixteenth-century anatomists taught that the child was carried by the male's sperm. Thus when in the seventeenth century Leeuwenhoek first put semen under the microscope and saw the wriggling "animalcules," he was convinced that he had but confirmed the long-held theory of the homonculus, the male's babies which he merely passed on to the woman for nurturing.

into an ironclad contractual marriage arrangement, sealing it by telling her that she follows God's law in bearing and rearing children, and warning her that if she should forget her place or her function she becomes a rebel to the cosmic order, man had found himself a servant who could not quit and who dared not rebel.

My closing note is intended to shed one further glimmer of illumination on the Renaissance conception of woman. That often repeated metaphor one finds in the sermons, the pamphlets, and the domestic conduct books of the age—the metaphor of the domestic body politic—describes man as the head and the limbs of the family. What such an anatomical figure does is to leave for woman the body, or more precisely the reproductive and nutritive parts, two apt symbols and reminders of her procreative function. This sexual role is reflected in two of the primary revolutions of dress that occurred during the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages feminine clothing had been all of one piece, seamless garments of long, singular lines from head to toe. During the Renaissance the lady developed a waist, literally cutting herself in half, and thereby accentuating the reproductive and nutritive functions by their very physical emphasis. The second bit of paraphernalia, introduced, it is thought, by Catherine de Medici, was the corset. Thus strapped and trundled, divided and accentuated by the bell skirt and the bodice, the Renaissance woman became a walking emblem of her ephemeral role in society: her procreative responsibilities emblazoned in her bisected body; her meek subservience emphasized by her external bindings.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350,* trans. Sondheime (Cleveland, 1962), p. 263. See also H. O. Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind,* I (London, 1911), pp. 442-70 *passim.* For a more detailed discussion of medieval mysticism see J. Leclercq, F. Vandenbroucke, and L. Bouyer, *La spiritualité du moyen âge* (Paris, 1961).
2. For a full discussion of this see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London, 1949), pp. 125 ff.
3. Andreas wrote *De arte honesti amandi* sometime between 1174 and 1186. The first two books, *De amore,* present the rules and the conventions of the courtly rites. But the third book, *De reprobatione,* is written from the viewpoint of an orthodox Christian, and here Andreas seems to reject the tenets of illicit love. See A. J. Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love* (Gloucester, Mass., 1965), pp. 34-37.
4. Denomy, p. 27.
5. March Bloch, *La Société féodale. La formation des liens de dépendance* (Paris, 1949), pp. 191-221. Bloch points out that feudal institutions developed in France at the same time that the family was constricting in extent.
6. Eileen Power, "The Position of Woman," in *The Legacy of the Middle Ages,* ed. G. C. Crump (Oxford, 1926), p. 407.
7. *The Second Sex* (New York, 1961), p. 94.
8. Sidney Painter, "The Family and the Feudal System in Twelfth-Century England," reprinted in *Feudalism and Liberty* (Baltimore, 1964), p. 200.
9. *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p. 216.
10. *History of the English Law, Before the Time of Edward I,* 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1898), I, p. 42.
11. Ibid., p. 43.
12. *English Gilds,* E.E.T.S., Original Series, 40 (London, 1870, reprinted 1963), p. xiii.
13. D. Herlihy, "Land, Family and Women in Continental Europe, 701-1000," *Traditio,* 18 (1962), 89-120.
14. Power, p. 411.
15. Ibid., pp. 411-12.
16. *Supergrow* (New York, 1970), p. 106.
17. Cf. Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Ithaca, 1958), pp. 121-227.
18. Thomas Becon, "The Catechism," ed. Rev. John Ayre, Parker Society (Cambridge, 1844), 111, 340.
19. Geoffrey Fenton, *Tragical Discourses* (London, 1625), p. 289.
20. "A Preparative for Marriage," *The Sermons of Maister Henrie Smith* (London, 1594), p. 20.
21. Chilton Powell, *English Domestic Relations 1487-1653* (New York, 1917), pp. 101-146.
22. Smith, "A Preparative for Marriage," p. 19.
23. "The Householders Philosophie," trans. T[homas] K[yd], 1588, *The Works of Thomas Kyd,* ed. Frederick S. Boas (Oxford, 1901), p. 255.
24. Sermon XXXV: "The Woman's Vail," *Works,* 2 vols., I, 487.
25. *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (London, 1622), p. 16-17.
26. Mitchell, p. 10.