STRENGTH AND WISDOM TO WOMEN, a Book Review

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Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism, by Mary Daly, Boston, Beacon Press, 1979

The feminist revival of the seventies has risen higher than any earlier wave of feminist consciousness. It beats now against that stony citadel, patriarchal religion, and Mary Daly has been a moon to pull this tide. Daly prepared for action by earning two doctoral degrees, in theology and philosophy from the University of Fribourg. Gyn/Ecology (1979) is her third book of feminist philosophy/theology. The earlier ones were The Church and the Second Sex (1968) and Beyond God the Father (1973). The three books show a progression of ideas, claiming increasing territories of thought for us as women. Gyn/Ecology is particularly brilliant.

We tend to underrate the power of great world religions because this power has been waning. But in their decline, formal religions have reduced the arena for moral debate. It has become easier for men in power to assign moral considerations to "some other department" which will, like women, lack power to implement values. The maintenance of human life itself seems to have been given a secondary priority.

There has been a need for feminist theory to deal with good and evil, to make judgements of events and historical materials, to call oppressors and destroyers by their rightful names. "Society" as villain is a bag of straw. Our greatest modern American feminist writers have taken up this task---Kathleen Barry, Susan Brownmiller, Phyllis Chesler, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, a few others, and certainly Mary Daly. Very few earlier feminists left works of such seriousness, and these tend now to be "unavailable." Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Woman's Bible is such an unfindable classic, and Daly in passing brings us to understand the reasons for its obscurity. In fact, she cites such numerous historical sources on the oppression of women that we come to recognize our deprivation of our own past. The pattern of this omission is discussed by Daly (of which more later).

The book Gyn/Ecology is divided into three Passages. The first, "Processions," concerns the power of myth, particularly religious myth. upon our imaginations. She shows that only the oldest myths allow women our full humanity. For the thousands of years since the currency of these primordial tales, women have been objects of various kinds in the world-wide myth structure, as organized to justify patriarchy. That such justification is still powerful is apparent. In our Christian, or even post-Christian, era, the vengeful values of the OLD Testament are alive and well in our literature and mass-media productions.

The second Passage, "The Sado-Ritual Syndrome," is the heart of the book and a most impressive contribution to feminist theory. It contains five chapters on the

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Mutilation and killing of women and a historical digression on 20th century phenomena. Together these sobering chapters girdle the globe and span many human lifetimes. They are:

Indian Suttee (widow-burning)
Chinese Footbinding
African Genital Mutilation
European Witchburning
American Gynecology (including psychiatry)
Nazi Medicine and American Gynecology

From here exhaustively researched material, Daly has derived a description of the pancultural Sado-Ritual itself, briefly set out on pages 130-133. This is such a useful way of looking at our condition that it deserves some space here. Daly calls the whole sado-ritual a process of erasure, both of women as persons and of men's responsibility for the oppression of women. The first sentence of each numeralled paragraph below is Daly's own; I have paraphrased the commentary from the several chapters of the Second Passage.

I. IN THE SADO-RITUAL WE FIND, FIRST, AN OBSESSION WITH PURITY.

The woman who is to be burned on her Indian husband's funeral pyre should not be menstruating. And the young African girl who has her vagina sewn up is being kept pure for her husband. The witch must be burned because she is a social impurity. American women have had their clitorises cut out in order to produce the undefiled vaginal orgasm.

II. SECOND, THERE IS TOTAL ERASURE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ATROCITIES PERFORMED THROUGH SUCH RITUALS.

A whole confabulation of lore on night-flying, hexing, magical vanishing of men's penises, etc., was put to the service of witchburners, to shift the blame for the acts to the victims. (And by the way, the root word for "witch" is Latin victima, "victim." Think about that.) Another and very different confabulation about "lotus hooks," perfumed decay, tiny embroidered slippers, mincing steps, etc., served to make binding little girls' feet seem attractive to Chinese for over a thousand years. Woman were said to "do it to themselves" for esthetic and erotic reasons.

III. THIRD, GYNOCIDAL RITUAL PRACTICES HAVE AN INHERENT TENDENCY TO 'CATCH'ON' AND SPREAD.

Male supremacy is hierarchy. Customs introduced at one level will enter others when they are perceived as useful in strengthening patriarchy. Chinese footbinding began at the court but it eventually removed large segments of women in all classes from active life. Witch torture and burning spread outward in all directions from Germany. American gynecology became "the only way to have a baby" in about three generations. (Time in labor is increased by the standard prone position. We have been harmfully overdosed with hormones, a fact discussed in the public prints since 1975.)

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IV. FOURTH, WOMEN ARE USED AS SCAPEGOATS AND TOKEN TORTURERS.

Mothers were (are) expected to perform the footbinding and genital mutilation. Nurses give enemas to women in labor. The "Bitch of Buchenwald" is publicized to mask the fact that Nazi atrocities were all planned and organized by men.

V. FIFTH, WE FIND COMPULSIVE ORDERLINESS, OBSESSIVE REPETITIVENESS, AND FIXATION UPON MINUTE DETAILS, WHICH DIVERT ATTENTION FROM THE HORROR.

Great ceremony surrounded the trial and burning of witches, although to be accused was tantamount to being condemned. Ornamental wrappings were developed for bound feet. Ceremonies associated with genital cutting in Africa may take several days and involve many people, each with a small role to play. That all this is ordered by powerful men becomes obscured; people performing the deeds do not feel responsible. Horrible sufferings are ignored.

VI. SIXTH, BEHAVIOR WHICH AT OTHER TIMES AND PLACES IS UNACCEPTABLE BECOMES ACCEPTABLE AND EVEN NORMATIVE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF CONDITIONING THROUGH RITUAL ATROCITY.

A very striking illustration of this is found on page 197 of the book, which quotes another writer:

> "To make it possible for children to give evidence before the courts in witchcraft trials, the rules regarding children as witnesses, which applied to all other forms of judicial proceedings and laid down that no witness below the age of fourteen could be heard, were suspended."

It is important to remember that several of these ritual atrocities (footbinding, genital mutilation) were of necessity done to <u>children</u>, in order to make them sexually acceptable to men on reaching adulthood. The natural woman somehow does not meet male "standards."

VII. SEVENTH, THERE IS LEGITIMATION OF THE RITUAL BY THE RITUALS OF 'OBJECTIVE' SCHOLARSHIP---DESPITE APPEARANCES OF DISAPPROVAL.

This is perhaps the most noteworthy point for American feminist scholars. The book <u>abounds</u> with examples of denial, misnaming, spurious justification, trivialization, a and plain burial of the facts concerning all these horrifying acts of hatred toward women by men. My reading of ordinary periodicals is qualitatively changed since Daly. This most lasting of all rituals of erasure is everywhere, once we are equipped to perceive it. Daly has issued a challenge to us not to flinch from the truth of history or current events, and she admits the difficulty, in quoting Adrienne Rich on pages 322-3:

> "Ordinarily one would associate the search for knowledge with eagerness, curiosity, the thirst to know. But for us, much of what we have to learn is depressing at least, sickening at worst. The <u>desire</u> for knowledge of our condition and in particular of gynocide and the enemy status to which we have been relegated is in direct conflict with the <u>burden</u> of horror and revulsion which that knowledge imposes on us."

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Now that we know all this, what has Mary Daly to suggest for dealing with the world as it is? In the Third Passage of the book, "Spinning New Time/Space," the reason for her preoccupation with language and meaning becomes clearer. The clues for coping have been there all the time, concealed from us by patriarchal tampering with imagery and value systems---pushed into the background, as Daly says, by the Fathers' False Foreground. We have what we have always had, the resources men have taught women to scorn.

First, we can learn to say "no" and "I will not." I will not be a token, an object, a doll, a child, a plaything, a victim. I will not nurture if I am only to be punished for it. I will instead grow up and seek knowledge, not propaganda. I will "Journey," as Daly puts it.

Second, we can cultivate and maintain mutually supportive friendships with other women, in which what Daly calls "sparking" can take place. "Sparking" might be defined as making the satisfying discoveries of our reality to be found in the best conversations with women---a play of ideas and raising of consciousness.

Third, there is the project of strengthening bonds between mothers and daughters. Daly has earlier shown that primal mythology supports these as fundamental human dyadic relationships.

We can reform our language and behavioral norms to remove sexist bias and aid us on our Journey. Daly writes of "spooking" by men on page 323:

> "Although some women on some occasions have the 'privilege' of being directly addressed by such names as cunt or pussy,,most of the time this language is used in all-male environments. Yet it is the common male view of all women and, although most women do not hear it directly, we receive the message in a muted way. It is conveyed through silences, sneers, jeers, excessive politeness, paternalistic praise and disapproval, aggressive physical contact (an arm around the shoulder, a pat on the behind), invasive stares. Since women often do not hear the messages of obscenity directly, we are spooked. For the invasive presence and the intent are both audible and inaudible, visible and invisible.....

And on page 324:

> " Exorcising this invasive presence requires acknowledging its existence and refusing to shuffle. This has the effect of bringing the spookers out into the open. Exorcism requires naming this environment of spirit/mind rape, refusing to be receptacles for semantic semen. As we become experienced in detecting the patterns of this apparently passive aggression, we become aware of its more sophisticated forms."

There follow several pages of various useful observations on the mind-war being conducted against us. More suggestions for opposing locker-room language, obscenity, pornography appear on pages 340-41:

> "On a practical tactical level women are using new words and transforming/recalling meanings of old words. Hags are doing this verbally and with clothing and body language. Hags dress comfortably, expressing our individuality

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and our responses to particular occasions, such as Halloween, Winter Solstice. Our clothing is useful for guerilla tactics in situations of confrontation. Spinsters feel comfortable with our natural look, and thus do not require the cosmeticized "natural look." Women journeying learn to forget false body language and re-call the Self-confident styles of walking/standing/sitting/gesturing which express be-ing. Furious women learning Karate and various forms of of Self-defense often experience a de-conditioning process, an escaping from from the invisible bindings of femininity, and an enspiriting sense of power, control, and awareness of the immediate environment."

Greatest of all is the need for us to live our lives with less passive waiting, more active moving toward becoming ourselves, OurSelves. We must reject youthful ignorance as the most valued state. To believe that our lives end with dewy youth and that our worth is determined by male approval is to succumb to the ultimate patriarchal brainwashing. Let us resist all the forms of psychic death, seek wisdom as we age, and demand respect for our dignity as "Crones" and "Hags." (Daly has unearthed earlier and more valued meanings for many words now used pejoratively of old women.) Patriarchy is gynocidal, says Daly. Men wish to kill in us our true Selves. Relentlessly, she quotes the debates of theologians as to whether women are human. Our fury at this is justified. If patriarchy has never felt safe in the presence of female wisdom, let us seek wisdom and glory in it.

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males go to recoup themselves? Where do they exercise human altruism? How do they recover from the deaths of their friends and mentors? How are their children protected from them long enough to grow up? Heinlein's work seems only good,,action-packed escapist literature, but it ends by being thought provoking in its very omissions.

4.c. "'Washed in the Blood of the Lamb'" from Chapter 9 in Olaf Stapledon's Sirius.

Sirius, the dog with human intellectual capacity, has in this chapter been exploring his spiritual side, and dissatisfaction with his indolent life at Cambridge has apparently resulted in a solitary religious experience "Surely the thing that I was crazily hunting must be the very thing that men call God, the dear and beautiful and dread."

He experiences a renewd commitment to serve humanity, and his religious curiosity leads him to approach a small Methodist chapel during services, where he repeats part of a hymn he has just heard. This performance is good enough to cause some consternation. Later he is caught up by a particular hymn sung in a Salvation Army parade, "Washed in the Blood of the Lamb," which seems to him to meld his two warring natures, human and wolf. That the Lamb's blood purifies somehow lends positive significance to his own experience of killing animals with his teeth and sinew. Humans too are subject to blood-lust; they even killed their Savior. Perhaps Sirius is no more animal than they. But then he thinks.

"'Not in this way, said the protesting part of his mind, not in the remission of clear thought and feeling for the sake of the mere warmth of togetherness, would one find the essential spirit, identical in himself and in these humans."

Stapledon, too, seems to be struggling to illuminate the basic issue, "What is our human nature?" The character of Sirius as it develops seems to suggest that humans would be much improved by an infusion of doglike loyalty. Sirius's magnanimity toward Robert, his rival for Plaxy is remarkable (and so is Robert's). The believeable menage-a-trois at the end required considerable skill from the author, in reifying the incredible with homely details.

But in the end, it is hard to swallow Sirius's "wolf-nature," no matter how artfully described. If this animal has the claimed superior human intellectual and emotional capacities, why does it take so little, really, to get him bounding about the moors killing ram, pony, and man? It seems to me a suave excuse for all such behavior by our own species. "We can't help our genetic matures," says the latest biological determinism, sociobiology. Bosh!

5.b. "So time mattered not at all." From "A Canticle for Leibowitz," by Walter M. Miller, Jr., Ch. 6.

This lies outside in a chapter chiefly devoted to historical exposition. We have been and our responses to particular occasions, such as Nativeness, Inter-solstices,