Images of Women in American Popular Culture

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CHIMAERA*; OR MODERN WOMAN
Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, M.D.

Advice literature for women has been a flourishing industry for at least the past two centuries. At first the experts were clergymen and physicians. Later they were joined, but not displaced, by home economists, efficiency experts, dieticians, psychologists, and a host of others. One of the most popular and influential advice books of this century was Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947) by Ferdinand Lundberg, a journalist and financial expert, and Dr. Marynia Farnham, a psychoanalyst.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, popular women’s magazines were all spouting ideas from the pages of Lundberg and Farnham’s book. Modern woman had become lost, a problem to herself and others, they asserted, because she had forsaken her femininity in a search for an independence unsuited to her nature. So persuasive was this message that in Betty Friedan’s view, it was instrumental in recasting feminine ideals for the 1950s. Friedan called the image they promoted, which focused on fulfillment through domesticity and motherhood, “the feminine mystique.”

In the following excerpt from Modern Woman: The Lost Sex, Lundberg and Farnham describe woman’s nature as an unsolved problem. The remainder of their book attempted to supply solutions based on psychoanalytic theory and Dr. Farnham’s clinical experiences with women.

...Women, if we turn to the poets, philosophers and prophets, have always been something of an enigma. No trust whatever is to be placed in them, according to nodding Homer, who believed there was “no fouler fiend than a woman when her mind is bent to evil.” Aristophanes thought there was nothing worse in the world than a woman, unless some other woman. To Aristotle she was “an inferior man,” to Virgil “fickle and changeful,” to Milton “a fair defect,” to Pope “the best reserv’d of God” but nevertheless invariably “at heart a rake,” to the scientific Francis Galton “capricious and coy” and far less straightforward than a man, to Whitman the very gate of the human soul, to Nietzsche “the second mistake of God,” etc. “Woman, at best, is bad,” said Thomas Dekker, seventeenth century English playwright. George Wilkins, a contemporary, said that they were “in churches, saints; abroad, angels; at home, devils.” Nathaniel Field, who wrote at about the same time, believed them to be “torturous as Hell, insatiate as the grave,” and John Webster, another playwright of the day, summarized it all: “Woman to man is either a god or a wolf.” Shakespeare, who probably saw more deeply into

*Chimaera: In Greek mythology, a fire-breathing monster, usually pictured as having the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent.

women (and men, too) than anyone else, either before or since, finally throws up his hands with a despairing, "Who is't can read a woman?" Lest too much be made of such remarks, which could be extended to infinitum, we must say the poets and philosophers have been no less confused and contradictory respecting the male, alternately self-abasing and self-apostrophizing.

Anthropologists, carrying the inquiry a bit farther afield, have found that in nearly all primitive cultures women are considered a fearsome mystery. A primitive man no more wishes a woman to cross his path at certain inauspicious periods of the month than certain Americans want a black cat to at any time. In both instances, a powerful bad medicine is thought to be generated, blighting to hopeful endeavors.

This book, however, does not deal with women as a general historical or evolutionary riddle, which they unquestionably are, but as a specific one produced by our own times. For in our times women have become, in sober truth, a riddle within a riddle. Men, too, may be a problem; one must concede this, if only out of deference to the bedeviled female who has had to cope with a man who was. And, by way of placing our subject matter in more precise perspective (and at the same time showing how our awareness of male misdoings), we may casually remark that Hitler was not a woman, nor was Mussolini, Al Capone, Dillinger, Lord Haw Haw or Judas Iscariot. We have not forgotten that there is an extensive historical rogues' gallery of males. But, focusing even more precisely, men usually become problems whenever women do, because anything that affects women very much soon affects everyone. Biographers will one day, we hope, come to understand that their true subject is hardly the man (or woman) they have chosen to scrutinize, and not his or her mistress or lover, but the mother or her substitute. One, standing before the bar of historical judgment, might often well begin their defense with the words: "I had a mother..."

Women in general are a more complicated question than men, as a few of the poets have sensed, for they are more complicated organisms. They are endowed with a complicated reproductive system (with which the male genito-urinary system compares in complexity not at all), a more elaborate nervous system and an infinitely complex psychology revolving about the reproductive function. Women, therefore, cannot be regarded as any more similar to men than a spiral is to a straight line.

Each sex represents an organic tracing of reality. But in one instance the tracing is simple (relatively), in the other complex and even devious. Because of their unchallengeably greater physiological and psychological complexity and because this fact of greater complexity has not yet begun to be taken into systematic social account (although the psychiatrists are grappling with it and are beginning to see a great light), women are the ones about whom debate rages, among themselves as well as among men...
Consciously, as a strictly moral character, Mary was out to do only good. Feminism, too, was dedicated—on the surface—only to good works, to bringing the lives of women somewhat nearer to ideal perfection. Unconsciously, however, Mary and the feminists wanted to do injury. Mary had a real grievance, but it was against her parents; the same was true of later feminists. These parents had been the agents of a vicious society (as exemplified by the childhood household) vis-a-vis the growing child. To Mary, all men were oppressors of women. All women were long-suffering, all the cards in the deck stacked against them—they were musculearly weaker and smaller than the male, inflicted with menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, child tending, and were denied the marvelous sphere of carefree action of the male (as for sober example, on the battlefield, an enlarged playing field). All men had always, without exception, beaten women black and blue, humiliated them, degraded them, as her father had done to her and her mother. And all women had, like her mother, accepted such humiliation without a whimper. It was a notion that the feminists never tired of elaborating upon. The first line, for example, in the History of Woman Suffrage (1889), by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Gage, militant American feminists, reads: “The prolonged slavery of woman is the darkest page in human history.”

In retaliation Mary wanted women to turn on men and injure them. The worst humiliation she could think of for them, however, the crowning ignominy, was to make them acknowledge the “equality” of women, their identity with men. Mary could visualize nothing worse, for while hating and condemning them she had too much need of them. Men, in her distorted view, could never be regarded as inferior to women. Men were never, in her view, overcome by women. It was women who were overcome by men. Underneath her aggressive writings, Mary was a masochist like her mother, as indeed all the leading feminist theorists were in fact. Aggressively Mary flung herself at men, only to be repeatedly repulsed. For her actions invited repulse. Overeager for what she desired—a man the precise opposite of her father, but measured against his remembered silhouette—Mary discerned what she sought where it did not exist and then took the initiative, committing the unpardonable sexual blunder of depriving the male of the initiative. The feminists were always doing this, thereby either driving men away from them or capturing psychologically impaired males.

By behaving as she did Mary indicated, as we know from clinical practice, that she was unconsciously seeking to deprive the male of his power, to castrate him. Unconsciously she probably wished to emulate the heroine of Greek drama, Electra, and kill her father, but this desire, although powerful, was powerfully deflected as untenable. It came out only in her round scolding of all men. The feminists have ever since symbolically slain their fathers by verbally consigning all men to perdition as monsters.

What Mary wanted, underneath all the confusion of her mind, was brought out in the stress of her tortured pursuit of Imlay when in a letter she expressed the desire to go with him to America, settle on a farm, and bear six children. She was ready, in emotional extremity, to repeat her mother’s role, and unquestionably she would even have endured Imlay’s blows—gladly—if only he had married her. Mary was ready to settle for anything, and therein further revealed her neuroticism. Women down through history have, as a rule, not bowed so low before the male as the arch-feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, bowed before Imlay.

Mary was emotionally forced to strive for power (until capitulating on any terms) vis-a-vis Imlay or any other man. This striving came out in her rushing talk and her professed familiarity with every idea that might be broached. It also came out in the way she forced herself on men and in the way she sought to hold Imlay to a bargain that had not been made. Not to strive for power, for mastery, made Mary feel helpless, then afraid and anxious, then utterly hostile and unhappy. Mastery made her feel less helpless; it was a defense against anxiety that, actually, revolved about her deep doubt of her power as a woman. This power was hopelessly compromised by her male strivings. The happiness she felt during the first stage of her affair with Imlay undoubtedly derived in large measure from the feelings of mastery it gave her. She had suddenly, we may surmise, glimpsed the possibility of establishing mastery as a woman. We can only guess at the state of her libidinal organization, but Imlay was unquestionably a versatile lover, had enchanted her sexually. Very probably he had been the instrument for lifting her sexual inhibitions.

Feminism did not select its underlying ideas from Mary’s letters to Imlay. If it had done so it would have been the opposite of what it was. In either event, it would have been drawing from a poisoned source. Only deeply disturbed women—disturbed by the nature of their childhood upbringing in the shattered home and the constricted circumstances they encountered in adult life—could have drawn what they supposed was pure wisdom from A Vindication.

As we have seen, A Vindication prescribed “equality” in all things between the sexes. Equality was the political catchword of the day; it would resolve everything, especially if joined with Reason and Liberty. In sober fact, however, whatever else men and women may be in relation to each other, they are not equal, identical. They are similar in species, different individually, and always complementary. In relation to each other what is crucial is not their similarity but their difference. Havelock Ellis, himself not a little infected with the feminist virus, tried to resolve the confusion caused by the easy use of the word “equality,” by substituting for it the term “equivalence,” meaning equality of value. But Ellis’ well-intentioned efforts were hardly appreciated, and Ellis entirely missed the point of what the feminists were actually aiming for, which was definitely not justice. It was, as Mary Wollstonecraft flatly said (and as many repeated after her), simply masculinity. And a female who attempts to achieve masculinity is psychically ill in the same way as a male who attempts to achieve femininity.

Once it is understood that Mary and her feminist successors,—including such eccentric arabesques as George Sand, who lived out the feminist neurosis in all its details,—sought to achieve masculinity, that is, the impossible, then everything else falls into place...
The portrait of modern motherhood which Lundberg and Farnham presented in their popular advice book emphasized the responsibility of mothers for the neuroses of their children. The following passage, which is from a section entitled "The Slaughter of the Innocents," classifies mothers into five types, four of which are destructive. It is only the "fully maternal mother" who produces well-adjusted children.

MOTHER AND CHILD
The spawning ground of most neurosis in Western civilization is the home. The basis for it is laid in childhood, although it emerges strongly later, usually from late adolescence until middle age, provoked by circumstances and conditions encountered in life. And as we have pointed out, the principal agent in laying the groundwork for it is the mother. Many women classified as housewives and mothers are just as disturbed as were the feminists, and for the same general reasons. There are mothers, for example, who, although not neurotic, feel dissatisfied with the life they are leading. The home offers them few energy outlets. The work they do in it does not bring them prestige. Others, neurotic by reason of their own childhood upbringing and the failure of life to provide them with satisfactory outlets, suffer from the same general affliction as the feminists—penis-envy. It is more repressed than it was in the feminists, but it is at work in the psychic depths.

The feminists, turning their backs on a feminine life, lived out, expressed, their penis-envy, and obtained great satisfaction thereby. The neurotically disturbed women who find themselves mothers and housewives, however, have consciously accepted the feminine way of life, are not aware that deep within them they suffer from the same general affliction as the feminists. For they were reared in homes greatly resembling those of the feminists, and they were subject to the same cultural influences. They could not escape.

Unlike the feminists, they have made sure of libidinal outlets in their lives. But they have increasingly foregone ego outlets, and have been unable at the same time to utilize their libidinal opportunitie. Many of them, even though not neurotic, cannot help but feel passed by, inferior, put upon by society's denial of ego outlets for them. When they are neurotic they feel the lack even more. To a certain extent a woman can derive great ego satisfaction from playing a fully feminine role, but there are dangers in it both to herself and to her children. Too many women today are forced to derive their entire ego-support from their children, which they do at the expense of the children, to the danger of society. A child can never be an adult plaything and turn out well.

The mothers of neurotics and of persons with marked neurotic traits, with very few exceptions break down into four broad categories, susceptible of further breakdown until one reaches the great personal complicity of individuals. These categories, in each of which the mother carries out pattern of her own upbringing and of the culture around her, are as follow:

1. The rejecting mother, who in various degrees from extreme to subtle apes society around her and rejects the child. She ordinarily has no more than one, or at most two.

2. The oversolicitous or overprotective mother, who underneath closely resembles the rejecting mother but whose entire activity represents a conscious denial of her unconscious rejection.

3. The dominating mother, who is also very often a strict disciplinary This type obtains release for her misdirected ego-drives at the expense of i

dren her pawns, usually requires of them stellar performance in all their undertakings.

4. The over-affectionate mother, who makes up for her essentially libin al disappointments through her children. Her damage is greatest with h

sons, whom she often converts into "sissies"—that is, into passive-feminine passive-homosexual males.

There is, on the other hand, the fully maternal mother, who fortunate accounts for perhaps 50 per cent or more of the births because she has mo

children than the other types. She does not reject her children, attempt t

overprotect them out of her guilty anxiety, dominate them or convert them into lap dogs. She merely loves her children.

It is the first three types who produce the delinquents, the difficult behavior problem children, some substantial percentage of criminals and persons wh

although moving in socially approved channels, are a trouble to themselves, a close associates and often to society. Along with the over-affectionate mother they also produce a large percentage of the confirmed alcoholics. Since some where around 40 to 50 per cent of the mothers are in the first three categories the wide damage they do is obvious and warrants fuller discussion.