

# THE QUIET ANTIFEMINIST\*

Beryl Rowland

*Dans un discours prononcé en mai dernier à la remise des diplômes de l'Université de Mount Saint Vincent, l'auteure lance un cri d'alarme contre les antiféministes silencieuses, ces femmes qui, d'une manière subtile, freinent les avances que les femmes ont accomplies dans ce qui est encore le monde des hommes. Ce n'est pas parce que quelques femmes sont maintenant des cadres supérieurs que la bataille est gagnée. Les femmes devraient s'entraider. Beaucoup peut être accompli dans les tâches qui sont généralement attribuées aux femmes (comme par exemple élever des enfants conscients de l'égalité des sexes). La femme dans le mariage devrait avoir une certaine indépendance sur le plan financier et la contribution des époux devrait être considérée comme égale. La personne la plus importante dans la vie d'une femme, c'est elle-même. Le sacrifice et le martyre ne devrait pas faire partie de sa vie.*

"The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of Women's Rights, with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor, feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety."

This queen was, of course, Queen Victoria, and her indignant message reminds us that women's struggle for equality is not new. The feminist movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be regarded as a series of insurrections, all of which, until now, have been silenced through the opposition of women as well as men. . . . Unlike Queen Victoria, they are

the *quiet antifeminists*. Because of their subtle opposition, all that women have gained up to the present time is the right to attend university, the right to vote, and the right to go out, at their peril, into what is still called a man's world. . . .

## Women as Social Targets

In France, at the end of World War II, as soon as the Nazis left, howling mobs dragged terrified young women from their homes and sat them on platforms in the market place. There they roughly seized the heads of these young women and hacked or shaved off all their hair while the crowd of onlookers, women as well as men, jeered and applauded. Their crime? They had been friendly to enemy soldiers. Ironically enough, such scenes occurred even in villages and towns where almost the entire population, from the mayor down, had co-operated with the occupying troops. Women are still the target for group animosity, especially young, pretty women. They are in any age. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, contrary to popular belief, the persecuted witch was often an attractive girl, not an old hag. Moreover, now as then, other women, partly through envy, partly because they see nothing wrong in male domination, acquiesce to the victimization of any woman who dares to defy convention.

We live in a violent society. Among the factors contributing to that violence is the subjection of women, the traditional image of women as the property of men. Domestic cruelty breeds cruelty on

a world scale. And as W. H. Auden said, "those to whom evil is done, do evil in return." Your sense of justice alone, whether you are a man or a woman, demands that you try to remedy the situation. The question is how do you do it: how can you give women the same rights and privileges as men?

*We make too much of the fact that a few women have become top executives.* We are being lulled into thinking that the battle has been won. It has not. Women may easily lose the small advantages that they have gained for two reasons: the opposition of women who have not yet experienced much discrimination and do not realize that, at forty years of age, even with updated skills, their commercial value may be less than it was at twenty; the opposition of many women who are not in the work force and think, not without justification, that they are being unfairly belittled. The effect of both these groups, when they join forces with the men, can be totally destructive. As a reminder of how little women have advanced, take a look at those international conferences and see who is determining our fate in the world. . . .

What direction should women take in order to succeed? They should not, in my view, try to emulate the dog-eat-dog system that prevails in the masculine world. It has been suggested that women, like men, should form a network, a kind of old girls' network. . . .

But the message of such a network is that *we* are better than *you*. We have rights that *you* have not got. . . . All networks involve hostility and contempt toward those who are not in the group, and I believe that this attitude is quite contrary to the general moral stance of women. . . .

### A Partial Solution

In the British Library is an early-fifteenth-century hand-written manuscript in English. It is a gynecological treatise by an unknown scribe. The text is a how-to-do-it

manual on childbirth and on women's gynecological problems.

"Men," says the writer, "are unsympathetic and have no idea how much women suffer to bring them into the world." The message is that women must rely on themselves. The writer says: "let one woman help another." . . .

*Let one woman help another.* This should be our purpose, but how is it best achieved? I think that one way of achieving it is through women's customary role. The future attitudes of both sexes are partly in the hands of the enlightened mother. If she treats her children alike and understands that few individuals can be regarded as exclusively male or exclusively female, she may contribute toward a happier and more just society. If she inculcates old-fashioned ideas about the role of women, she will produce daughters who still run the risk of being exploited all their lives by men and by society. The task is not easy. *Almost all the traditions work against promoting a spirit of equality in the sexes.* The fairy tale describes how a father insists that his daughter marry a man whom she detests, and she has to do so; a medical play-kit comes in a box which on its cover shows a boy with a stethoscope and a girl with a nurse's cap on her head. Moreover, being physically more vulnerable, the young girl cannot have as much freedom as her brother. . . .

### The Hazards of Marriage

Women who marry — and most of them do — are putting their lives in immediate and continuous jeopardy. *Marriage for a woman is a most hazardous profession.* The married woman with children is but one husband away from the poverty line. Discarded, deserted, or widowed, she steps over that line.

The message that we are now receiving is that marriage does not last, that it is natural in our sophisticated and materialistic society to discard the mate who has reared the family and to take a younger one. Throughout the ages, women

have exemplified marital devotion, and our social case histories are crammed with accounts of their incredible self-sacrifices and capacity for forgiveness. In the new mores, women once again are the losers. The male chauvinist, who as a younger man insisted that his wife devote all her time and energy to his material comforts, now slips easily into the vanguard of the feminist movement and marries a career woman who can support him in his old age. One hopes that the present fashion is a temporary neurosis, but the lesson for women is clear: . . . only by achieving some kind of financial independence can she prescribe the kind of world that she wants for herself and for her children. . . .

Chaucer's Wife of Bath arranged her marriage settlement at the church door before the wedding ceremony. Today's bridegroom usually brings as little to the marriage as the bride. In fact, the liberated woman will often work to put her man through college or pay off his debts instead of putting herself through college first.

*There are business matters in a marriage that should be arranged before the wedding.* If the woman is to do the housekeeping, she should settle on the sum to be paid for it; if she is to work, she should reach an agreement that will ensure that the couple conduct their financial affairs on an equal basis.

These may seem to be mundane matters but they suggest how, at least in part, woman can protect herself in today's world. There are other problems that she may not be able to (solve). At a period of life that is usually vital to her career, she may be out of the work force. She may want to stay home with her children for some years. . . . *Not every woman wishes to work outside the home, and my major argument is that the contribution of both partners must be regarded as equal.* Let one woman help another and let every woman have the freedom to choose her role.

*We are not equal in our abilities, and many jobs are neither exciting, stimulating, nor important.* When



“... and who were you before you were married?”

Campbell

From *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely (Indiana University Press, 1980)

we see a woman rise to some eminence, consider all the effort, isolation, and hostility that she has almost inevitably experienced on the way up and perhaps still does. She owes her success to exceptional ability, but she receives none of the accolades that are showered on a man in a similar position. Yet she has usually struggled to the top alone, and she stays there alone. The eminent man usually has two women behind him, a secretary and a wife devoted to his progress and working ceaselessly for it. We suspect that he would never have succeeded without them. Because of their insecurity, women share the male resentment toward women of some achievement but (are) less open . . . (about expressing it). These are the quiet antifeminists, an opposition all the more formidable because though often covert, it is also very pervasive. This kind of opposition was, of course, most prevalent twenty years ago, when the inferiority of women was taken for granted. Had I listened to it, I would not be (here today). . . .

Those of us who are free spirits know that popular opinion is something that you must learn to despise; it is almost invariably wrong. You have to think independently, do what you think is right, and refuse to be deviated by the opinions of others unless you feel certain that they are given from a point of view of superior knowledge and experience. . . .

. . . The most important person in your life should be yourself. You have to be a self-sufficient and

happy person in order to fulfil both yourself and the needs of others throughout life. Consider carefully your goals and go for them. Make certain that they are not too low for your capabilities nor too high, and work to achieve them. Being yourself does not mean that you put yourself first in the small things of day-to-day living. Consideration for others, such courtesies as giving up one's seat in a bus to an elderly lady or holding open a door, are part of being civilized. . . . But you cannot . . . let (what you want to do) slide away from you for reasons of self-sacrifice. You are not expected to be a martyr. Later on you may find to your surprise that you are *not* the most important person in your life. Husband, children, or friends of many years' standing become, almost before you realize it, so dear to you that there is no limit to the sacrifice you would make for them. But before you reach this stage, you will go through many experiences. In doing so, . . . be yourself and do not listen to the voices of reaction, the voices of the quiet antifeminists.

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