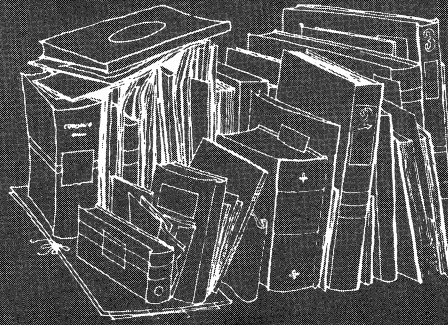


Book Reviews



GYN/ECOLOGY: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, Mary Daly, Beacon Press, Boston, 1979, \$17.98

Susan G. Cole

Mary Daly has gone *Beyond God the Father*, beyond *Beyond God the Father* and beyond. In her previous book (*The Church and the Second Sex*) she dissected and rejected Judeo-Christian values, urged women to claim the power of naming and of being, and emerged as feminism's resident philosopher. In *Gyn/Ecology*, she still deals with the impact of religion (it is the aspect of patriarchy she knows best) but transcends it, placing religion in its appropriate political context. 'Patriarchy', she writes, 'is the prevailing religion of the entire planet'. With the help of astute feminist perception, a wicked wit (Daly, a self-described witch, would approve of the adjective), and not a little anger, Daly proves the point. Calling herself one of the Revolting Hags, the Harpies, a woman who will be a subject and not an object in the world, she is, quite literally, a roaring success.

Daly continues the experiment with language that she began in *Beyond God the Father*. Through her coined phrases and new-fangled words she condenses ideas that would demand pages from a similarly ambitious explorer. This is in part why she succeeds where others would not even bother to try. Our planet is a 'phallocracy' and Daly discovers patriarchy. Or just playfully: the distorters of myth are 'Mysogynist Mix Masters'; anti-abortionists have a 'fatal fetal flaw'.

Daly virtually soars through the material. With breathtaking ease she can dismiss the ideas that have waylaid feminist thinking. Androgyny, she scoffs, is simply 'John Travolta and Farrah Fawcett-Major scotch-taped together.' Social phenomena that have received the attention of meandering social critics she can explain in a single deft phrase: Verbal abuse and obscenity women encounter every day is 'semantic semen'. All of which is to say that Daly doesn't have to invent words to write well.

It is almost enough to make the reader feel inadequate. This is decidedly not Daly's purpose. She wants to take us on a kind of voyage. We are travelling in a new procession. As hags, crones, harpies, spinsters, the women Daly has reclaimed for us by taking these labels to their linguistic origins, we journey through the first passage — Processions. In this first section

Daly describes the myths and symbols we have swallowed whole. Patriarchy is the religion of reversals and Daly methodically chips away at every piece of phallocratic armour. Only in a Judeo-Christian patriarchal culture, she argues, could we see such stunning inconsistencies. Patriarchy has manipulated the symbols of Christianity to humiliate, denigrate and subjugate women. When we view the status of women in Christian theology, we must conclude that the omnipresence of God is really omniabsence; the tree of life has been transformed into the torture cross; the revered Virgin Mary into the Totalled Woman. This last gem is typical of Daly's art and she applies it with full force to her discussion of abortion, transexualism, space linkups (or 'international intercourse', as Daly would have it), Dionysian freedom, rape, even robots.

The second passage through the Sado-Ritual Syndrome is a terrifying one, but to pass through it is to exorcise it. Daly takes the rituals of the Indian Suttee, Chinese footbinding, African genital mutilation and the European witch-hunts and identifies them for what they are — instances of gynocide. Daly will not be put off course or intimidated by accusations of 'racism, imperialism, or any other ism that can pose as broader or more important than gynocidal patriarchy'. Her intransigence allows her to solve the feminist 'how can I briefly describe the world' dilemma because she is able to isolate social or religious customs from disparate cultures to show that no culture has a monopoly on patriarchy.

This second passage is essentially the body of the book and it is stunning. It is effective partly because Daly's descriptions are so painfully explicit and because, even with Daly's exhaustive research, we cannot estimate the number of the sado-rituals' casualties. More important, Daly points out that stripped of their religious overtones and cultural camouflage, the atrocities cater to a bizarre erotic necrophiliac fantasy — for men only. As is inevitably the case with the fantasies of those in power, this one has been lived out historically and women have early deaths, bound feet and clitorectomies to show for it.

Daly traces the operative pattern of the Sado-rituals. They have seven aspects in common, the obsession with purity for example and the use of women as token torturers. But Daly takes special pains to wrest the sado-rituals from the hands of academic apologists whose sado-scholarship has legitimized each of the brutal practices. She ruthlessly analyses the motives of academics who insist on defining the suttee as 'suicide' and the pain of footbinding as perhaps 'the adolescent discomfort of wearing braces.' At the same time Daly

rescues the books that have been fading at the back of library stacks, the texts of feminists who have tackled the issues and have been either villified or ignored for doing so. There have been two cover-ups, one of the long history of gynocide and another of the work that wanted to expose it and Daly has blown both cover-ups sky high.

Perhaps because the subject matter is too close to home both culturally and temporally, Daly's section on gynecology does not work as well. What distinguishes gynecological practice from the other sado-rituals is that none of the others' proponents could argue so loudly that the practices were good for us. What further complicates matters is that while practitioners have performed unnecessary radical mastectomies (and no doubt gleefully watched Happy Rockefeller and Betty Ford do the promotional footwork for them) and while gynecologists have zealously cut away our genitalia at the slightest hint of a minor malfunction, the lives of thousands of women *have* been saved by gynecological medical practice.

This is not to say that the excesses of gynecology ought not to be exposed, or that there are not dangerous repercussions to the physician as God syndrome. But Daly doesn't focus clearly enough. She remarks that 'experimentation is part of the routine procedure of gynecology' while failing to mention that experimentation is part of the routine of all medical practice (witness the medical establishment's dilemma over whether to lionize Christian Barnard or to censure his ambitious surgical risks). Of all the experiments, Daly chooses to examine the DES Tests which, in a rare hysterical lapse, she calls the DES Massacre. Since the DES data is just filtering in, her case is not very strong and it is curious that Daly chooses to go after the DES syndrome and to give short shrift to what could be one of this century's more grizzly excesses—the megadoses of estrogen consumed by women taking oral contraceptives.

Elements of the sado-ritual syndrome can be found in the gynecology establishment, with nurses playing the role of token torturers, but Daly's description of the gynecology conspiracy is somewhat over-stated. Unfortunately Daly doesn't stop there but leaps headlong into a comparison between gynecological practice and Nazi medical murders; one begins to regret Daly's need to stretch a point that was shaky from the start. My own regrets were exaggerated by the fact that up to this point I had been sailing along, certain that I was finally reading that illusive definitive feminist text. Daly *is* splendid but, and this is written with a mixture of sadness and relief; perfect, she is not.

From the female condition, Daly moves to the feminist condition. This third passage is more visionary than analytical and the loose structure gives added meaning to Daly's definitions of spinning and weaving. The last passage is not the end of the journey but a 'defining theme' that keeps us in tune with all the passages. After emerging from the demoralizing second passage we are urged to 'spook back', 'unpaint' and get to the business of Gyn/Ecological process. The section entitled 'The Fire of Female Friendship' in particular, helps to give us the terms that can make friendships between women radical and creative. Daly doesn't deal with the problems and pain of 'sparking' but this third passage is meant to inspire, not to offer a blueprint for revolution. One of the reasons why the second passage is so moving is because the information Daly harnesses is hard fact. Her task of rendering the ecstasy of a third passage that is vision and not historical event is much more difficult. As a result, this last third of *Gyn/Ecology* is more fragmented than the rest of the book. Daly has so much to say and charges from theme to theme so swiftly that one wishes she would stay in one place for a while longer so that we could catch our breath.

But most of the time Daly is in control and her account of the 'Disassembly of Exorcism' in which Revolting Hags and crones unravel the seven deadly demons could stand on its own as a prose poem dedicated to our power.

Gyn/Ecology is a difficult book. For one thing, it contains big words. Daly warns us of this in a footnote in which she states with characteristic concision that 'Amazing Amazons have no patience for downward mobility of the mind.' As you can see, *Gyn/Ecology's* footnotes are as rewarding as the text and they should be read just as carefully: *Gyn/Ecology* is amazingly dense, brimming with ideas. Consider the fact that during her discussion of Chinese footbinding, Daly dispenses with Chinese socialism handily — and in a footnote. Daly is good for ten ideas per page and that doesn't include the words that she can pull out of her bag of tricks at any time, each of which requires a slight pause, just to think it over.

It is an extremist book, radical, challenging while at the same time inviting readers to join the ranks of spinsters and hags who can live, love and create ourselves, and pushing us towards a feminist vision which Daly makes virtually irresistible. Scattered among the 'Women and Everything' books that have been written by feminists, we have seen only the occasional foray (Juliette Mitchell's and Shulamith Firestone's come to mind) into the realm of honest-to-goodness overview. This is not surprising considering the amount of material one would have to cram into a single book in order to depict patriarchy. It isn't easy. Add feminist vision to a description of patriarchy — and do it all with clarity — and you have something awesome. And Mary Daly's book is awesome. Just how much farther beyond *Gyn/Ecology* anyone can possibly go remains to be seen. I have a feeling, though, that Daly will find some way to continue the journey.

This review also appeared in *Emergency Librarian*, V.6, no. 2.

Women and Aging: A Report on the Rest of Our Lives, Louise Dulude, Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Box 1541 Ottawa K1P 5R5. Free.

Ella Manuel

This report is an important contribution to Canadian Women's Studies. It is a meticulously documented study on the condition and the expectations of 'a large group of highly deserving, hard-working and dedicated wives and mothers who are one of the most destitute classes of citizens in Canada.'

It asks how such a situation could have come about. It answers by examining pension plans, social assistance, old age pensions, present living conditions and the choices available to old women who wish to change them.

It states: 'Canada's old women have not yet started to be politicized . . . nor have old women's interests been properly represented by the senior citizens' organizations that presently exist in Canada.' It points the way to improving the lot of old women, not revolutionary but requiring the combined efforts of all women, which all of us should consider as part of our on-going struggle.