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The Continuity of Female Stereotypes: from Recluse to Bunny

Frances Beer



Les Stéréotypes ne meurent pas: la recluse et l'allumeuse

Cet article examine en détail les stéréotypes féminins du Moyen-Age qui régissaient la conduite des femmes à cette époque. On se rend compte qu'aujourd'hui encore, les stéréotypes commandent un certain type de comportement qu'on est loin d'avoir éliminé.

The history of female stereotypes, and of their success, presents a baffling puzzle. How, for example, did the idea of woman's irrationality get started; how was it presented so that women as well as men believed it? Obviously women who accepted the negative female stereotypes and believed in their own inferiority were more easily kept in a subordinate position. But what induced them to accept the stereotypes?

The solution to this puzzle may be approached through a study of the women and the literature of the Middle Ages. The misogynistic tradition in the Middle Ages was rich and active, sometimes chilling in its virulence and sometimes very funny. 'Not only is every woman by nature a miser', writes the cleric Andreas Capellanus towards the close of the twelfth century,

but she is also envious and a slanderer of other women, greedy, a slave to her belly, inconstant, fickle in her speech, disobedient and impatient of restraint, spotted with the sin of pride and desirous of vainglory, a liar, a drunkard, a babbler, no keeper of secrets, too much given to wantonness, prone to every evil, and never loving any man in her heart.

Classical views of women as defective males continued to be accepted through this period. In the act of procreation, woman was seen as the cold passive partner who contributed merely the matter; the warm, active man provided the form and the principle. The ovaries were seen as counterparts of the testicles, but not as strong. Although both partners were supposed to produce seed the male seed was better. In the light of this 'biological inferiority,' it was obvious that nature intended women to be subordinate.

During the period of early Christianity, the concept of woman as physical cripple was augmented by that of woman as moral cripple: if Eve had not disobeyed we would all still be in the Garden of Eden. Her disobedience was her chief offence. But women were more susceptible to vice in general because of their defective reason. They were proud, lecherous, envious, as well as insubordinate. Above all, it was the image of woman as temptress, *janua diaboli* (the devil's gateway), that loomed especially large for the Church Fathers—Tertullian, Jerome, Anthony, Augustine—to whom the ascetic ideal was so critical. Even a 'good' woman was not to be trusted, since contemplation of her attractions might lead to unclean desires.

During the eleventh century a curious phenomenon occurred: an idealized female stereotype evolved out of the popular cults of Courtly Love and Mariolatry. The ladies of courtly literature varied as to the degree of their worldliness and sensuality, but at one extreme—as in the case of Dante's Beatrice—they approached the Virgin in nobility, patience, and purity, and could help a man refine his passion and turn his love towards God. This positive ideal, though it seems opposed



to the image of woman as the devil's gateway, in fact complements it. The responsibility for the man's damnation still lies with the woman. Since they are capable of this high spiritual function of rescuing their more carnal suitors, it follows that they are to blame if they fail in this mission and if the men succumb to lust.

From the time of the early Christians the ascetic model of physical self-denial and withdrawal from the world had been important, and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in England it was not unusual for women to commit themselves to the enclosed life—a solitary life of penance and contemplation—as recluses, or anchoresses.

In this way women would have no further contact with the world and its corruption, and, in fact, would live as if dead. This would obviously be a safe career-choice for a girl who had been brought up to see herself as a daughter of Eve, and who was convinced of her propensity for pride, lust, and the rest of the Seven Deadlies. Such a girl, concerned that her beauty might bring about the damnation of any number of aroused young men (however distant or unwelcome their ardour) would realize that the only way to be sure of staying out of trouble was to lock herself up.

Around 1200 one of the most important prose works of the early Middle English period was the *Ancrene Riwe** (Anchoress's Rule). It was composed for three sisters who had committed themselves to the enclosed life, and in this text we find an intricate weaving of these various stereotypes.

The cleric writing the work, evidently their adviser, seems to be fond of the women and he often addresses them with real affection and humour. Even the extent to which he believes in the evils of their flesh is not obvious. What is clear is that he knows their inclination to believe it. He is ready to exploit their feelings of guilt, fear, and frustration in order to manipulate the stereotypes, making his charges adhere to the *Rule*. However fond he may be of the young women and however sincere in his faith and in his desire for the sisters' salvation, the technique of emotional blackmail that he uses is often harsh and ruthless.

Woman's reason is seen as defective in the author's retelling of the story of the slaying of Isboseth (2 Sam. 4), who had chosen a woman to guard him as he slept:

See with what confusion [the dazed Isboseth] acted! He appointed a woman to be doorkeeper. A poor sort of guardian! . . . 'Woman' is Reason grown weak when it should be manful, stalwart and bold in true faith.

Possessed—indeed, representative—as she is of defective powers of reason, we are not surprised to learn that woman's flesh is a 'frail vessel . . . as fragile as any glass . . . [that] breaks even more easily than does brittle glass'. All Seven Sins are represented by animals, and the eleventh cub of the Lion Pride is the sin of the temptress, given to

carrying the head high, curving the neck haughtily, . . . pursing up the mouth . . . giving affectionate looks to men, speaking like an innocent and affecting a lisp, . . . daubing unguents on pimples, colouring the hair or the cheeks, plucking the eyebrows or pushing them up with moistened fingers. . .

Lechery has been portrayed as the Scorpion because it has a face 'rather like a woman's, while its hind parts are those of a serpent. It . . . practises deception with its head, . . . and stings with its tail'.

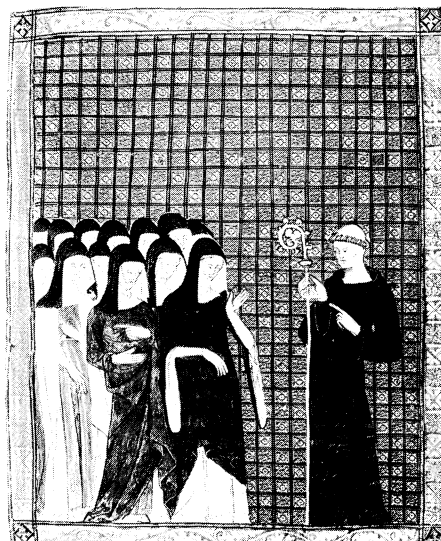
These images of vanity and treachery are not applied specifically to the sisters; in fact, of the Seven Deadly Sins, the author says 'you yourselves are very far from them', and of Gluttony, 'you, who know nothing of such things, . . . give thanks to God that you have never known such uncleanness.' Rather, the author's goal seems to be to create a negative pole by establishing the weakness and corruption of which women are capable, as if to say: 'Now, girls, you don't want to be like *them*, do you?'

Eve, 'our first mother', is the prime representative of the negative pole:

[she] looked upon the forbidden apple, and saw that it was fair, and she began to take delight in looking at it, and to desire it, and she plucked some of it and ate it, and gave it to her lord. . . Let every weak woman, then, go in great fear, since she who had just been shaped by the hands of God was . . . led into that great sin which has since spread over the whole world.

Dinah, daughter of Jacob, was raped, and her rape was avenged by her brothers (Gen. 34); but because her beauty inspired the lust of Schem (the rapist), the author of the *Rule* attributes the blame to her:

. . . it was commanded in God's name in the Old Law that a pit should always be covered; and if an animal fell into an uncovered pit, the man who had uncovered the pit had to pay the penalty. These are very terrible words for the woman who shows herself to men's sight. . . The pit is her fair face, and her white neck, and her light eye, and her hand. . . The judgement on the woman who uncovers the pit is very stern, for she must pay for the animal that has fallen into it. She is guilty. . . and must answer for his soul on the Day of Judgement.



So the author lays before the sisters their enormous burden of guilt: this is their heritage and part of their very nature. But he does offer an escape from guilt — if they successfully follow the *Rule*.

Freedom from the burden of guilt is in itself an attractive prospect. Their counsellor makes the following of the *Rule* the more appealing by arousing in the women a combination of fear and loathing of the flesh; and here the approach, or attack, becomes much more personal. On the question of Touching (in the chapter on Custody of the Senses), the sisters are told that “touching with the hands is . . . an action so shameful . . . loathsome . . .” that he (who loves them so well)

would rather see [them] hanging on a gibbet. . . [their hands] should scrape up earth every day out of the grave in which they shall rot.

As an inspiration for humility he reminds them that

in the middle of your face, which is a noble part of you and the fairest, between the mouth with its taste and the nose with its faculty of smelling, have you not as it were two privy holes? Have you not come from foul slime? Are you not a vessel of filth? Are you not destined to be food for worms?

And, as an added deterrent,

All the pain of this world, compared with hell . . . is nothing but playing at ball; it is all just the size of a small drop of dew compared with the wide sea . . . all the suffering of this world is but a shadow of the suffering of hell.

Thus the author, in setting up the general negative standard of female corruption, offers the sisters the option of escape through obedience, but at the same time plays upon their fear and hatred of their own bodies. This sequence is one half of his controlling technique. The second part involves establishing a positive standard, and a possible reward which is based on the image, more or less explicitly sexual, of Christ as the perfect lover and the anchoress as his courtly lady.

The ‘good’ woman of the *Rule* is one who keeps quiet. Eve got into trouble by talking to the serpent, Mary spoke but a little; St. Paul (1Tim. 2) is cited: ‘I suffer not women to teach’; and ‘you, my dear sisters, are following Our Lady, and not the cackling Eve: therefore an anchoress . . . should be as silent as possible.’

The good woman feels no anger, is gentle and compliant, for as long as anger lasts in a woman’s heart . . . she is just like one who has been turned into a wolf. . . she should throw off that rough skin . . . and in sweet reconciliation make herself smooth and soft, as a woman’s skin naturally is.

And the good woman is chaste:

Show your face to no man, and do not let your voice be lightly heard, but turn them both to Jesus Christ, to your dear Spouse.

The stereotype begins to sound suspiciously like a heroine out of a nineteenth century novel.

As for the reward (and for this stage of the operation, paradoxically, the author plays quite freely on the worldly desires of the sisters) the Suitor is allowed to speak for Himself:

Am I not fairer than any other? Am I not the richest of Kings? Am I not of the noblest kindred? Am I not the wisest . . . the most gracious . . . most generous? Am I not gentle and more tender than any other?

Christ is the best lover. He is handsome, ardent (and rich!); if this is not reward enough, then

I will . . . make you the queen of the kingdom of heaven. You yourself shall be seven times brighter than the sun . . . all that you want shall be done in heaven, and on earth too; yes, and even in hell.

How can they resist? Fear, scorn, guilt, filth, corruption on one hand; on the other, love, money, rank, passion, power, glory. ‘Stretch out your love to Jesus Christ,’ exhorts the spiritual adviser of the anchoresses,

You have won Him! Touch him with as much love as you sometimes feel for a man. He is yours to do with all that you will. . . He makes love His sovereign, and does all that she commands.

Now, as then, we face the difficulty of defying stereotypes. Exploitation of guilt and desire in women is hardly anomalous: we may not fear hell, but we know that grimy toilets and ring-around-the-collar are the marks of a failed wife; we may not be interested in heaven, but we still long to be Queen of the Prom (and maybe get a Birks diamond). The *Rule*’s ideal of the quiet, ‘good’ girl is still with us.

So is the image of Eve, the temptress, though now the degree to which women are able to arouse lust at a distance is a measure of their success. And, as with the three sisters, the manipulation of guilt and desire can still succeed in producing a combination of both extremes. Today, 13 June 1978, the *Globe and Mail* carries a story about the Toronto tryouts for the Silver Anniversary Playboy centrefold. One candidate, arriving early, spends ‘an hour in the hotel lobby quietly embroidering the Biblical quotation ‘Give us our daily bread’ onto a piece of cloth as a present for her mother.’ Why does she want to be Playmate?

I think it feeds your ego. A lot of people will look at your figure that way, and . . . why not? It’s not something you want to hide. . . I’m using this as a stepping stone to get what I want faster and quicker. . . it’s basically an insecurity if you can’t enjoy a good-looking woman.

Plus ça change. . .

**The Ancrene Riwe*, trans. M. B. Salu (London: Burns and Oates, 1955).



Photo by Laura Jones