

# MAN AND WOMAN

By ROSEMARY SHEED

**T**HIS IS A peculiarly difficult subject to write about dispassionately, because one is inevitably either a man or a woman, and the whole emotional syndrome of the 'sex war' seems to go so deep. Whether it is a man who feels he has been destroyed by a domineering mother or hen-pecking wife, or a woman who feels unfairly tied by her physical limitations and involvement with the children she has borne: all of us can find in our sex the reason (or excuse) for our inadequacies, failures and frustrations, or our general inability to measure up to the ideal person we should like to be.

Though the inferior position of women is more obvious in our society (and one must remember that there *are* societies in which the women dominate) the 'man-eating woman' who enslaves husband and children by possessiveness, ambition, or obsessive self-sacrifice or some combination of all these, often gets her own back in disastrous though less immediately apparent ways. One is tempted to wonder whether the desire some men manifest to keep women in their place is not the result of the feeling of inferiority such women induce. A vicious circle, in short.

However, most people would, I think, agree that the vicious circle is not just a chicken-and-egg one, but definitely starts with the inferior position of women in society, which more or less forces those with any drive or ambition to channel these into dominating their families, since that is the only field in which they have a chance. (Though even that was not, and is not even now, always the case! The domineering husband also exists.) There is at the present time a tremendous aura of romance attached to the suffragettes, the pioneers of birth control, the first women to fight their way into the traditionally male professions. (One american woman lawyer I know maintains that even now it is harder for a woman to become a successful attorney in the U.S. than it is for a negro.) There is something awe-inspiring in the courage with which they defended their principles, their reputations, and even their physical safety. But the very fact that they seemed such a threat at one time is curious: it is hard to believe how anyone could fail to see that

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a woman with a satisfactory career, the mistress of her own life and possessions, and accorded full rights as a human being, would make a better balanced wife and mother (and often even possibly a more efficient housekeeper!). There seems to be little difference between to-day's anti-feminist and the 'gentleman' of a century ago who declared that if working men were educated they would no longer be content to be hewers of wood and drawers of water: and what would happen to society then, for heaven's sake? Or those who deny black men the right to run their own lives today. Or those who support authoritarianism in schools, hospitals or anywhere else. Perhaps it is simply that those who have power over others regard their inferiors as less complete human beings than themselves, and are frightened to death of what may happen if the existing structures are tampered with in any way.

All these attitudes are similar, certainly, and equally rooted in fear of disturbance and fear of the unknown. But the anti-feminist is different in that it brings into play a whole complex of emotions connected with 'mother' and everything that this word means, and also with childish *and* adult attitudes to sex so personal and often so little understood as to make objective assessment difficult if not impossible. Though it is accepted today that women are educated, can vote, and hold their own in the professions, there remains prejudice against women in many fields, against the idea of women in positions of authority over men, against their demands for equal pay, and in particular against the idea of a woman 'competing' with her husband. (Families in which the woman does the bread-winning and the man looks after the children, however much this may suit the talents of both, are considered eccentric, if not unnatural.) And many women, whether at the level of being turned down for the big executive job, or of being told 'We'll need your husband's signature on this', feel resentful, and tend to get their own back in the small, mean ways open to them.

The attitude of the Church towards women, in particular, is one that arouses great anger. Few things could have made this clearer than Sally Cunneen's recent book,<sup>1</sup> which analyzes the results of a questionnaire about the position of women in the Church sent out to the readers of *Cross-Currents*. It points out that though women were invited to observe the last two sessions of Vatican II, 'they could come in token numbers . . . to listen; they could not speak

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<sup>1</sup> *Sex, Female: Religion, Catholic* (New York 1968: London, 1969).

from the floor. Nuns, widows and single women were among the invited, but no married woman with a living husband . . . . Although the Church has always upheld the dignity of women, now it must see her equality as well'. The combination of quite nauseating floweriness about the force for good women are, their purity, dignity, nobility, etc., with a total denial of them as *persons* in practice, seems to be the thing that most annoys many women. One nun describes the Church as 'the stag party supreme'.

Though it is asserted by many that the laity as a whole are in a second-class citizen situation, and that discrimination against women is not so much special to the Church as the result of the attitudes of our society as a whole, the position of the *laywoman* does seem in general to be about the bottom, especially if she is so tied to the house by her large family that she does not belong to any organization outside it. What is perhaps especially difficult at the present time is the limited emancipation of women, which makes those who are 'just housewives' feel inferior and dissatisfied; and indeed their work, in these days of labour-saving devices, frozen foods, bought bread, is often very unsatisfying. In addition, with the advance in education and the amount of entertainment available both outside and inside the home, they are not needed intellectually by their families as were the mothers of past generations. But until society accepts that this is a problem and is prepared to do something about it, by providing sufficient day-nurseries, helping married women to keep their jobs or return to them, encouraging schoolgirls to develop as individuals and not just to set their sights on becoming housewives,<sup>1</sup> and in general supporting rather than just tolerating mothers who wish to work, one sees little hope.

I do not mean to suggest that all mothers *ought* to have jobs outside the home: merely that they should be free to choose for themselves. It is as outrageous for a woman with young children to be forced by desperate economic need to take a job as it is for a woman to be unable ever to get out of the house or away from her children, and just be herself for a while. Nor do I mean to suggest that in this men are *ipso facto* any more free than women: many men have to take up uncongenial, repetitive, or unsuitable work because they have been unable to earn enough in other jobs, or have been limited by family or other circumstances as regards the

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York and London, 1963), is a most important contribution on this point.

training, or travelling, or hours needed for the work they would have preferred. Our so-called enlightened society is one in which the human being who is really satisfied in his work is the exception. But what is special to women is that the fact of being able to bear children, which is itself no more than is done by all female animals, *automatically* limits their opportunities to do anything else. And this in an era when most housework can be done mechanically, and psychologists and educationalists are begging for young children to go to playgroups and nursery schools for their own better development and not simply to free the mothers. Mrs. Cuneen says:

Interestingly enough, in response to my question, 'When economic problems are not a major concern, and assuming children are well taken care of, what is your attitude to married women working outside the home?', the single favourite choice of all groups was that it was 'a personal matter', but by far the highest percentage of those who simply 'disapproved' of working wives was scored by priests.

And she quotes some quite incredible advice from a priest to married women:

If, as a wife and/or mother, she is considering gainful employment outside the home and in the competitive market place, let her bear in mind that *added temptations* to her personal and marital status lurk there. Therefore, nothing less than deep-rooted, *urgent necessity* should prompt wives and husbands to consider seriously the dubious crutch of an over-and-above career for the wife and/or mother of the household; for its dangers can sometimes far outweigh its 'advantages' to the marriage and home. In hastily and lightly adding to her 'career', a wife and mother could enkindle the displeasure of the Lord of Marriage, causing him to withdraw his blessings.

One wonders whether these men have childhood memories of steaming cups of cocoa waiting for them when they got home from school; or whether they imagine how nice it would be to have a dear little woman in a frilly housecoat waiting for the lucky non-celibate when he gets home from work; or are they simply afraid that the next thing is that the women will be wanting to take over *their* job? One does wonder, more seriously, whether such a writer as this is living in the real world at all. How does he imagine the

wife who is *not* a mother spending her day if she may not compete in that dangerous market place? Must she for ever bottle fruit and bake bread in order to retain the good pleasure of the Lord of Marriage? Or would he permit a little (voluntary) social work?

There seem to be three stereotypes in the view of women: there is the ideal, virginal, cloistered-nun type, whose model is Mary of Bethany; there is the temptress, representing the evils of the flesh, whose model is Eve; and there is 'Mom', whose place is the home, bandaging the cuts, soothing the sorrows, being all things to everyone in the family with never a thought of self – the only model for whom must be some imaginary nostalgic figure from a dimly remembered cosy nursery world, or possibly simply a perfect compromise between Mary and Eve. (The Mary versus Eve bit, which according to Mrs Cuneen's survey so delights the clergy, is quite peculiarly irritating to the real husbands and wives she heard from.) In none of these three cases do we seem to be dealing with actual people. Now, I am not saying that men never get stereotyped, and it certainly is a tendency we all have when faced with the bewildering variety of human nature: 'Men are really just little boys'; 'The husband is the head of the family, the woman its heart'; 'Women enjoy scenes'; or 'Men hate scenes'; even the old, 'Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can; seldom in a woman, never in a man'.

Of course, doctors pigeon-hole their patients, teachers their pupils, shop assistants their customers, editors their readers. The notion that 'that sort of person' will predictably behave in a certain way is almost invariably destructive of genuine human contact. As a south african friend of mine bitterly remarked, when one of her fellow countrymen says, 'I know the bantu', it generally means that he has never actually known *a* bantu at all.

All this sort of meaningless generalization seems to reach a kind of paroxysm in the comments about women made by some of the celibate clergy, which even some women, because of the respect in which they hold those clergy, can be 'conned' into accepting.

Though the anti-feminism in the history of christianity certainly reflects the attitude of western civilization as a whole, there are tendencies in many other religions to fear the power of sex, and consequently to reduce the status of women: religious people are more inclined to make the kind of body/soul division that results in such a fear, as Fr O'Connell points out above. Our society still reflects something of greek tradition, of thinking of women only as

useful for producing children: it would be among other men that a man would seek not only intellectual companionship, but sexual fulfilment as well. There is also the aggressive instinct, the tendency everyone has to kick someone else; which of course accounts for much class and racial prejudice, and helps to explain why the lot of women has tended to be worse the lower down they are in the social scale. The man who is treated inhumanly at his work is more likely to act the boss at home in compensation.

Yet, at the same time, as Margaret Mead has shown,<sup>1</sup> there are societies where the fact of being able to bear children is so important, and provides women with such a strong sense of value and identity, that the men are by comparison far less secure and self-confident than their mothers, wives or sisters. (Even in our own society, the actual experience of 'having a baby' is generally felt by most women to be something tremendous and, at least temporarily, self-enhancing: though this is likely to be less the case in the hygienic large-scale hospital unit to which medical advance is inevitably tending.)

We do not seem as yet to have achieved anywhere a society that can function without second-class citizens of some kind: whether slaves, or the working classes, or immigrant minorities, or women. And such distinctions seem to have to be justified by the notion, or at least the assumption, that those second-class citizens are happier that way because they are naturally inferior (or, if not naturally, at least by tradition and historical development which it would take centuries to overcome), and do not want the responsibilities that go with a higher position in the social scale. In other words, though we agree in theory that all men are equal in the sight of God, some are certainly more equal than others (even perhaps in the sight of God?); and, as I suggested earlier, the less equal do not need to be treated seriously as individuals with personalities of their own. Christian society is still far from reaching the reality stated by St Paul:

In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently to achieve such a society demands a 'conversion', in

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*Male and Female* (London, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> Gal 3, 27-28.

the good traditional sense of *revolution*. It seems to me that an excellent way to begin this particular revolution is to re-consider our society's assumptions about women. We are, in fact, in a better position today than has been the case in most other periods of history to realize that women are individuals, just as men are. Women are less limited by their physical weaknesses than ever before. Where it took a strong man to cope with horses and horse-drawn vehicles, any woman can drive a car; where child-birth used to be dangerous, it is now considerably safer than crossing a main road; where running a house used to be a demanding full-time job with special skills, it now takes less time, and even the most unskilled man can prepare the frozen peas. Men work shorter hours and can spend more time with their children (except where low wage-rates force them to earn a lot of overtime pay), and it is becoming increasingly common in our society for fathers to bathe and feed their children, tell them stories, and generally do things that used at one time to be thought of as exclusively women's functions. We may admire Katharine's splendid final speech in *The Taming of the Shrew*:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,  
 And for thy maintenance commits his body  
 To painful labour both by sea and land,  
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,  
 Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;  
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands  
 But love, fair looks and true obedience;  
 Too little payment for so great a debt . . .  
 Why are our bodies soft and weak and smooth,  
 Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,  
 But that our soft conditions and our hearts  
 Should well agree with our external parts? . . .

and yet see it as possibly a slight over-simplification of what life was like for most women even in Shakespeare's day: certainly quite unrecognizable as a picture of modern marriage (except for the wife of a deep-sea fisherman, perhaps; but even she tends to have plenty to do in his absence!).

We are, however, in a period of flux. As Betty Friedan points out,<sup>1</sup> the great-grandmothers of the present generation of american

<sup>1</sup> *The Feminine Mystique* (New York and London, 1963).

women were pioneers who could handle a gun, help build a house, manage the animals when their men were away, as well as generally having to make all the family's clothes, chop wood, bake bread, and grow the vegetables. They bore their children without help from hospital or anaesthetic, educated them without benefit of Dr. Spock or even, in many cases, of any school. They were, in short, a far cry from the fainting, laced-up victorian ladies we associate with that period. Nowadays, with modern technology, education, television and other mass media, the western woman has no such demands made upon her, and yet nothing has really come to take their place in making use of her energies. The farmer's wife may still have a satisfying (though exhausting) life, with little time to worry about 'the position of women', but for the average urban or suburban housewife the problem is a major one, and joining the Catholic Women's League is not generally much of an answer.

Yet if we really take advantage of what modern technology and education offer, it should be possible for both men *and* women to be freed from the labours to which their sex inevitably shackled them in the past, to stop thinking continually in terms of what their 'functions' are and devote more consideration to the individual personality of each human being just as a *person*. And it is surely to this that christian education and christian thought should be chiefly directed – making each of us fully himself or herself, not in isolation from our society, but in the context of it. I do not mean by this that we should accept the values of western capitalism, but that we should see ourselves as part of a wider community which it is up to us to make the kind of community we want. Just as it is wrong to think men superior to women, so equally it is wrong to think european civilization superior to other civilizations; each group has its own contribution to make to the human community as a whole, and as societies develop so their contributions will change. There was a time, certainly, when a man had to be able to shoot and hunt, a woman to weave and spin – and there are places where this is still the case. The tragedy is that where modern technology should have made it possible to see beyond such 'type-casting', we can still find women who feel they must apologize for going out to work, or men who are embarrassed to be seen helping with the baby. A girl garage attendant who gave me much useful advice about my car told me she could never advise a man: it would be thought too unfeminine. She would rather stand by and watch



him make a mess of his engine than take such a risk! A sad comment on twentieth century England! Are men really so insecure as to feel inferior that a girl whose job it is to know about cars should know more than they do? (I know cars are a peculiarly complex subject psychologically, but it still seems depressing.)

Apart from being superior in physical strength, men seem to have no qualities not possessed equally by women given equal chances. The only major differences are that women have the ability to bear children (though not unaided!) and are far less likely to end up in prison (though their influence may be the prime cause in getting some men into trouble). Generally speaking, surely what matters is to make the most of our humanity, and help everyone with whom we come into contact to do the same, whether they be male or female, white or black, well-endowed mentally and physically or handicapped, introvert or extravert, or above all, maladjusted, and not easily able to be integrated into the community. And it is here that our catholic belief that all human beings are of inestimable value, and every one unique, should really come into its own. Instead of working out blueprints for a theology of women, or of sex, or of marriage or any other abstraction, we should be concerned with seeing just what is demanded of us *here and now* in Christ's command to love our neighbour as ourself: whether that neighbour is a samaritan, a black, a white, a mental defective, or a woman! 'Why can't a woman be more like a man?', cries professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. Why can't africans take advantage of the legacy of our unique parliamentary system? Why must hindus still regard the cow as a sacred animal? (We in England know that this privilege is reserved to dogs.) Give 'them' a nice new house and they'll turn it into a slum. And then there are women drivers . . .

One of Mrs Cuneen's respondents has this to say:

I am aware of my faith in my daily life as a feeling of development toward becoming *me*, something that is part of all my activities. Rather than a vocation to any specific state in life, we ought to think of vocation as becoming one's self – an on-going, never-ending process of self-discovery and the formation of relationships, bringing us toward the being God had in mind for each alone.

I cannot think of a better description of what it means to be a man or a woman.