IS ANATOMY OR CULTURE DESTINY?

By LYN STEPHENS

MAVIS WAS IN HER LATE 40S and had been married for 28 years to a successful and personable public servant. Their two children were successful academically and socially. They lived in a wealthy northern metropolitan suburb and had a wide social life, a house in France and a beautiful home in England. Both were involved members of their parish church, and Mavis had recently been confirmed, regarding it as an important step on her faith journey to make a public declaration of her growing commitment to the Christian way.

She was a painter who taught as well as having regular shows. She came to see me several years ago when a friend of hers, who recognized trouble when she saw it, suggested it. Mavis had discovered that her husband had been having an affair and, as a result, she was beside herself with shock and grief. It was more than the 'normal' reaction to a discovery of this nature. Knowing this, my first wonderings were aimed towards finding what the transference was towards her husband and/or the woman with whom he had been unfaithful, but as her story unfolded I was faced with something different. Over the years of their marriage, the question of Arthur's faithfulness had arisen perhaps three or four times. On each occasion, Mavis had been told that she was imagining things, had a spiteful and deceitful mind, probably had been thinking about being unfaithful herself, and had not one ounce of trust in Arthur, his word nor his commitment to a faith which would have prevented him from being unfaithful anyway.

It transpired that on each occasion that Mavis thought there was 'something going on', there indeed was. Following the revelation of the many affairs, her anger was immense, and not primarily focused on how many women Arthur had taken to bed. He had written her a letter following her confirmation, saying that now she was a proper Christian, she should forgive him his bad behaviour and not let the sun go down on her wrath. Arthur made an appointment for Mavis to see her family doctor because she

was so distressed, and she went with great trepidation, believing that she was about to be given tranquillizers, asked to see a psychiatrist and told to pull herself together and realize that men did these things, usually because the wife had failed her husband in some way or other. At the last moment Mavis found the courage or insight to see her GP alone. To her amazement and profound relief the GP said to her what I had said a couple of days previously, that her husband had denied her reality consistently and for all the years of their marriage, probably had a personality disorder and certainly what was happening in Mavis at present was a reaction to the years of perverse and cruel distortion of her perceptions of the world and, in particular, their relationship.

It is, of course, another matter as to why Mavis had permitted this state of affairs to continue for so long, when her friends and daughter had seen the reality for some time. That did not begin with her marriage. The distortion was compounded by the reaction of her parish priest, who had not seen the plausible husband for the sick man he was, and had counselled Mavis to 'forgive and forget' and to continue her psychotherapy because it would show her the monstrous nature inside her that she had denied all her life.

I have given this case at some length because it seems to me to encapsulate much of what has been said and discovered by feminists about women and their experience in their upbringing, relationships and work, and as users of psychology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Mavis' denied reality is a stark example of the dismissiveness many women have experienced when they have been investigated by psychologists. There is a presumption that women are deviant white middle-class men. This crude yardstick has all but disappeared from the studies, but it has not really been replaced by an idea of a human being who may be of one gender or another, of one class, race, age, state of health, educational level, sexual orientation, religion or region or another. It ignores child-rearing practices and the dominant cultural expectations and presuppositions which lead to the making of a person.

At the beginning of work inspired by women's consciousness-raising groups, women thought that having more practitioners who were women would result in an amelioration of androcentric methods, norms, issues, presuppositions, sample-groups and conclusions. There has been some change, but nothing like the hoped-for revolution occurred as institutions, public and academic, largely

remained unaltered. Alternatively, feminists chose issues which were woman-identified, and thereby risked the traditional response of marginalization at best or outright rejection by the journals, associations and institutions. Some exceptions to this rule met with a form of hi-jack, which both allowed the research to stand and denied the dynamic which made the work necessary in the first place. Faced with this kind of academic colonization, some feminists withdrew from the field altogether, believing it to be an impossible activity. Others pursued instead either work which was feminist within a feminist milieu, or worked in centres, workshops or practices which minimalized gender-based conflictual relationships. The choice of whether to work within a system believed to be beyond reform is ultimately a personal one, often requiring an almost pathological degree of optimism.

It is in part as a result of the work with women patients that many feminist psychotherapists have continued; a belief that change is possible for individuals is coupled with a belief—and a hope—that as individuals people the world, changes may occur. The feminist's answer to the alternative posed in the title is 'yes'. And this seemingly flippant response is important because it challenges both the way the question is posed, and answers it in the same moment. Feminism's task is always to do both of these things. It must challenge frameworks because they condition the answers in terms of content and what counts as an answer. This conditioning is determined by the society one lives in, its culture and heritage, and by the individual experience and pathology of the person who frames the question. And included in that individual experience is being of one gender or another.

Until comparatively recently in human history, being of one gender, the male, has meant that with it have come sets of functions, attitudes and achievements which have been taken as insolubly linked with maleness. The equivalence made between these sets and being a man is not a necessary one, but they have been given the status of 'natural' difference. This status is conferred in a number of ways: by law (Austrian legislators prohibited 'female persons' from participating in any political activity—Freud was 11 years old at the time); by convention, habituation, example and precept (a whistling woman is no good to God nor men), by threat of violence (rape as reprisal or reward, not only in war) and by presupposition mistaken for information. (Aristotle's belief that women contributed nothing in pregnancy but were a seed-bed is

as much a matter of his inability to believe that women *could* contribute anything as of investigative physiology. The fate of the embryological discovery that the basic template of humanity is female, not male, is interesting. Discovered in the 1940s it has not become part of the general way of thinking.)

Aristotle's thinking takes us to the crucial exchange between the external world and the internal one. For what is taken as natural is informed by the content of unconscious processes—my own and others'—individually and collectively transmitted through culture, certainly, but based on an experiential model of what feels natural. By their very nature, unconscious processes are not accessible, while their experienced derivatives *feel* 'given' in an axiomatic sense. For something to feel against nature or unnatural is no guarantee that it is, because that judgement will be formed, in part by the skewed conscious or unconscious paradigms and experiences, as well as by defence mechanisms, and by inappropriate and partial transformations of infantile fantasies and by somatic sensation. Freud's concept of primary processes is important here.

> They [dreams] exhibited a constant sliding of meaning. The mechanisms which are in operation here . . . are displacement . . . whereby an apparently insignificant idea becomes invested with all the psychical value, depth of meaning and intensity originally attributed to another one; and . . . condensation, a process which enables all the meanings in several chains of associations to converge on a single idea standing at the point of intersection. A further instance of this specifically unconscious type of functioning is afforded by the overdetermination of the symptom. (Laplanche & Pontalis: 1973)

Perhaps two examples will serve, albeit of conscious material. In reviewing a dream we often 'know' that although a figure looks like a lion it is *really* Aunt Mary. The quality of that kind of knowing is primary process based. I once conducted a survey among my cricket-loving friends, to find out which county they thought Jesus would have played for. The responses had much to do with their own affiliations, of course, and granted that he was excluded from playing for Yorkshire, the most violent response was, 'Well, it couldn't be Glamorgan!' from a Hampshire woman for whom it was unthinkable that he would display such bad taste. This 'unthinkable' quality is another sign of the primary processes at work. When they are examined, the prescriptions for the natural

role of women fall into this category, I would argue. This mistaking of internal processes for reality is essentially mad, and where it involves the denial of the reality of another person's experience of themselves, and enforces behaviour, it is fascistic. For it to be believed of a woman, by men or by herself, that not having a penis makes her a castrated male,[1] and that that lack is *real* incompleteness, compensated for by a husband and children, is to believe primary process thinking. When she learns that difference is always hierarchically construed in an androcentric world, it presents her with a distorted and damaging view of reality. In my view, it is a failure to deal with the concept and experience of plurality (a failure based in omnipotence and envy) that excludes the possibility of an alternative, justified Other.

It is interesting to wonder what the result would have been had anatomical difference been interpreted in another (equally natural) way. Theodora Wells' rewriting of the script is interesting and not only amusing:

> By design, female genitals are compact and internal, protected by her body. Male genitals are exposed so that he must be protected from outside attack to assure the perpetuation of the race. His vunerability obviously requires sheltering. Thus, by nature, males are more passive than females and have a desire in sexual relationships to be symbolically engulfed by the protective body of woman. Males psychologically yearn for this protection, fully realising their masculinity at this time and feeling exposed and vulnerable at other times. A man experiences himself as a 'whole man' when thus engulfed. If the male denies these feelings, he is unconsciously rejecting his masculinity.
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> (Lewis: in Bernay & Cantor 1986)

Feminism has shown that femininity and masculinity are ideological practices, and the second half of this century in particular has provided what ought to be enough evidence for it. The persistence of misogyny disguised as truth requires explanation. Listening to a phone-in programme one Sunday evening, I heard a rabbi, a deacon and a teacher in Islam—all women—being questioned about their roles. Apart from the striking trivialness of most of the questions (who would ask male clergy about how they managed their shopping?) and some overtly hostile callers, one man's contribution stopped me in my tracks. 'Why aren't you satisfied with being proper women, and doing what you have

always done?' he wanted to know. In the tone of his question were such feelings of abandonment and pain that there was a silence from the three speakers and the presenter. Gently, one of the women began to explain, and he cut through her reply with 'Why don't you look after priests, like you're supposed to do. It's all wrong!' and hung up. This constellation of women, fathers (priests) and nurturing is crucial, I think, to the issue. There is what I privately call the 'baby-bear syndrome': the fantasy that if women as daughters, wives or mothers become more autonomous, and therefore less unquestioningly available for those who consider themselves to have a right to be nurtured, there will be less for them, and like baby-bear they will find theirs all eaten up, and then where will they be?

It brings us to the issue of dependence and the resentment and envy in the one who is dependent towards the care-taker (usually the mother of the child). The trend in psychotherapy and feminist psychotherapy alike is towards understanding and structuring a theory of early object relations and their course for both girl and boy infants. It is in this period that an infant's sense of gender is passionately formed. Only recently have the important consequences of the differences in the dynamics for girls and boys in relation to the mother been taken seriously and positively. For a boy, his gender and his separation from his mother are linked together, and to retain intimacy and love for her is to risk being regressively infantilely dependent, as he was when that love-bond was originally formed. In order to inhabit his identification with his father, he has to experience difference which brings separation and loss. Is it any wonder, then, that when faced with difference, men have responded with a reaction-formation[2] which makes difference the source of aggrandizement?

For a girl, her sense of gender identity is known through continuity with the mother from whom she is bound to separate. Her cognizance of her father leads her to experience difference as sexualized and, for most of our history, repressive. For the girl who turns to her father to find herself received as a member of a deviant or denigrated gender has the choice between not being received at all and taking on the package of his prejudice. Dorothy L. Sayers characterized this as the 'The ladies, God bless them' or 'The women, God help us' response. Further, as the mother too is a member of this denigrated or idealized group, genuinely without freedom or power, other conflicts arise. Today's

young women have the possibility of new ego-ideals—women pilots, judges, principals, film directors, prime ministers even, women who make non-traditional choices about relationships, children and careers—and these are firmly part of the world she inhabits. If she is cared for by a 'traditional' mother, there are more serious difficulties than those of a 'fuddy-duddy' mother. Underlying the 'traditional' mother's conception of her and her daughter's role are the primary process presuppositions which damage the identificatory bond. Thus success not only seems to trigger fears of loss, but success also involves betrayal of the mother who does accept 'her place'. It may also be the case that the mother will experience envy at her daughter's increased opportunities, and unless the mother is able to acknowledge her envy, and this implies knowing more about her own sense of being robbed or failing in courage, she will attempt unconsciously to scupper the growing autonomy of her daughter. This may become an issue for the older female therapist who, in the counter-transference, experiencing a younger woman's burgeoning autonomy and greater opportunities for a forum for her abilities and desires to flourish, may *enviously* introduce issues of child-bearing and responsibility towards others where this is not appropriate, and is intended to curb or destroy the patient's gains. But where the therapist is able, even ruefully, to delight in a patient's success, it provides an important experience for many women for whom this is a rare thing. At the end of one session, as I was showing out a young woman, she suddenly dragged me from the front door and across the street to see her new car—a red sports car—parked next to my rusty Renault 4 (she did not know that, but I did) and she said, 'What do you think, is it too powerful or wasteful?' I saw joy threatened halfway through the sentence, and grinned widely and said, 'I hate you, you bitch: it's wonderful!' She collapsed into floods of tears which turned into laughter. In the following session she said that she had expected me to react like her mother, who wanted her to be a secretary rather than the actress she is—and that this was an overt form of the unconscious envy at her daring and proper audacity in finding her own voice.

In Carol Gilligan's important study *In a different voice* she says, 'When assertion no longer seems dangerous the concept of relationships changes from a bond of continuing dependence to a dynamic of interdependence' (p 149). She writes of the images of relationship held by men and women, and points out that given the patriarchal

assumption that they follow the same course, it is not surprising that the theory cannot accommodate women's experience. She says,

> . . . in thus dividing the world of love into narcissism and 'object' relationships, [Freud] finds that while men's development becomes clearer, women's become increasingly opaque. The problem arises because the contrast between the mother and the self yields two different images of relationships. Relying on the imagery of men's lives in charting the course of human growth, Freud is unable to trace in woman the development of relationships, morality or a clear sense of self. This difficulty in fitting the logic of his theory to women's experience leads him in the end to set women apart, marking their relationships, like their sexual life, as a 'dark continent' for psychology (*op.cit.*, p 24).

Using interviews, self-assessments and 'moral dilemma' questions, her argument is that while men perceive relationships (and perhaps all the world) hierarchically, women perceive relationships as networks. Therefore it is not surprising that given a nurturing attitude towards those networks, women are often faced with a choice between not hurting and acting for themselves. This is usually a false polarity. Mature women wish to replace the 'not to hurt' motivation—a compromise—by acting responsively towards themselves and others, in a way that sustains the connections. This is impossible to do when the issue is clouded not just by the differences of network and hierarchy, but by the confusion between masculinity and power. The striving for mastery (shared by both women and men) is distorted into a drive for power, where difference may be 'controlled'. For if difference is experienced as a source of terror, then defences are mobilized on an individual and corporate level, and we are at once into a power struggle and relationships become politicized.

It may be simply that any power-wielding group does not voluntarily give up its power, but I think it is more complex than that, for to believe that men will not willingly refrain from exploitation of women denies the dynamic present in any reform: that of an idea of compassion and justice. Dorothy Dinnerstein suggests, in *The rocking of the cradle and the ruling of the world*, that the 'crucial psychological fact is that all of us, female as well as male, fear the will of woman' (p 161). She argues that under the present conditions of child-rearing, the earliest prototype we have

experienced of absolute power is female and that what makes female intentionality so formidable—'so terrifying and at the same time so alluring—is the mother's life and death control over helpless infancy' (p 164). Taken together with Winnicott's (1971) idea of the infant's use of the environmental mother in a loving and benign cycle of destruction and repair, Dinnerstein's plea for parenting by both sexes may lead to an increase of tenderness in men, and a diminution of the feared and solitary power of women. As the sharing of parenting becomes more commonplace, we will be able to test the hypothesis.

An interesting extension of this argument is to be found in Natalie Shainess's paper, *Antigone: symbol of autonomy and women's moral dilemmas* (Bernay & Cantor: 1986). Wondering why Freud's followers used Electra as the model for female sexual development, she suggests that Antigone, criticized by Creon for never having learned submission, represents a special fear in men: that 'they may repeat their dependence on the mother and feel defenceless in adult life' (p 110). Electra is a model of immaturity in adolescence used as a model for adult femininity, she says, and takes Antigone's 'defiance' of Creon and the laws of the state as a patriarchal description. Instead, Antigone's actions may be construed as audacity: courage combined with caring, rooted in love rather than defiance or hatred. The final image in Steinbeck's *Grapes of wrath* also presents a picture of a strong, nurturing woman who will not, in her nurturing, exploit dependency.

I was given recently *Paul Temple and the Conrad case* which the BBC has produced in its Radio Collection. Having heard the original broadcasts in my youth I looked forward to renewing my acquaintance with the fearless detective and Steve his wife, who had, in my memory, played a significant part in the solution of the mysteries. I have been taken aback by the reality: whenever there was danger, death or intellectual activity, Temple speaks lines like, 'Stay back, Steve . . .' or 'Never mind, darling, I'll explain later' (he never does). Steve is permitted intuition about people, and once interviews a character on her own; she gets the wrong end of the stick, of course. The experience has highlighted several things: there has been a genuine change in society's attitude to what women do (Sara Paretsky offers a contemporary model in V. I. Warshawski, as does Amanda Cross in Kate Fansler). But whilst feeling relieved that the 'Steve' phenomenon is absent (in its overt forms) from most of what I see and hear and read, I

experienced a resentment and sadness at the insidiousness of the assumptions behind the script, and if, when it was originally broadcast, I believed Steve to be a liberated character, what must the contemporary reality have been like? I shudder to think. I do not wish to attack Francis Durbridge as particularly sexist, but merely to use the play as an example, more mild than some, of the presuppositions about what women may do, how they think and behave, which permeated society then, and which has its contemporary equivalents, and affects individuals, both men and women. For if we cannot celebrate and trust difference, there is no hope for us; as there is no hope if we do not understand interconnectedness in a world threatened by destruction. Infantile omnipotence prefers destruction to compassion, because it retains the illusion of control; adult maturity knows about loss, contingency and the other. We need grown up women and men if we are to survive!

NOTES

[1] This is not to deny penis-envy; a young child envies what another has or is, and a young girl may envy and overvalue the penis because in her experience it comes to symbolize masculine privilege and socially constructed superiority. Envy is overcome by the knowledge and experience of 'I may have it/do it too', and requires non-envious others. For women, their capacity to give birth and suckle is sited in reality, and their capacity to be penetrative and seminal is symbolic. For men impregnation is real and gestation and nurturing symbolic. The confusion between observation (girls feel envious towards boys' genitals) and interpretation (boys' genitals merit envy) is disastrous.

[2] Reaction-formation: where one emotion is repressed and replaced by its opposite. A conscious example is when we are supremely polite and attentive to someone we cannot stand.

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