

8 THE DEGRADATION AND REFORMATION OF WOMEN

Let the women and girls of the great American republic be warned in time by what happened to the womenfolk of the great Roman republic in the ancient world. After describing the stability and nobility of the family in the Roman republic Professor Hugh Last writes in his chapter on "Family and Social Life" in *The Legacy of Rome*:

The new ideals which had come in from the East where home life was hardly known, overlaid on the Roman reluctance to suppress the female sex, ended in the spread at Rome of a moral license which finally destroyed its victims. The Greek view of woman was that she should be the silent servant of her husband. ... When this ideal was brought to Rome, where such effacement of the women was impossible, the result was that they clung to the care-free life of the house that was not a home sanctioned by the Greek tradition, without surrendering the claim to equality with their husbands justified by Rome. So there arose the race of unlovely women who bulk large in the history of the early empire -all unattractive, some repulsive for their attainments as intriguers, poisoners, adulteresses, and even worse-the destroyers of the Roman home, who taught every one with whom they came into contact to live for themselves alone. In the sordid picture which the age presents, the only feature of encouragement is the promise of extinction which their selfishness contains. Already by the end of the Republic race-suicide had shown itself to be a threat full of danger, and social legislation aimed at an increase of the birth-rate was at once among the most important and least successful of the Emperor Augustus. But limitation of families went on with ever-increasing rigour until by the time of Hadrian there had ceased to exist all except one of the great houses which in the age of Cicero had formed the aristocracy of Rome.

It was against the license of which such things were the result that at length there came a long-awaited protest from the Christians. In the apostolic age the Christian attitude to women was by no means severe. . . . When Christianity saw the effects on civilization of this unbridled liberty among women, it inevitably and rightly reacted towards a more stringent view-a view less liberal than the Roman, but still a view which circumstances made necessary. The Roman emancipation of women had to be annulled when woman was no longer able to enjoy her freedom aright; and so the new tendency was in the direction of the Greek ideal whereby the woman was the humble servant of her husband and no more.⁵⁵

In the light of this profound analysis one cannot but view with alarm what is happening to women in the great Anglo-Saxon democracies. Having discarded all Christian standards of modesty, chastity, and fidelity which raised Western woman to a new dignity and status in the world as a person created in God's image and redeemed by the blood of Christ, modern, post-Christian women now surrender themselves to sexual exhibitionism and refuse to take on the responsibilities of motherhood. Can any sane person doubt that in this state of sexual overstimulation there will inevitably develop a withdrawal of interest from sex itself? Obscenity is rapidly taking the place of desire, and exhibitionism does duty for potency and delight.

As the commercial promotion of lust increases in intensity, so there will develop a deficient sexuality throughout our lands as men turn away in disgust from such shamelessness and brazenness.

If women discard their modesty, which is a woman's chief jewel, by undressing their bodies in public, they will destroy whatever male respect for womanhood still remains. Thus will God turn the tables upon shameless and immodest women.

As Hugh Last has warned us, the heathen predecessors of the present generation of post-Christian Anglo-American-Canadian women paid a terrible price for such wantonness and shamelessness. They destroyed the stability of Roman marriage and of the homes of the Roman Empire.

With the coming of Christ-into the Roman Empire a new race was born, and when a new race is born, the women have to be changed. Of these new and wonderful Christian women of the early Church, Ethelbert Stauffer says:

There are plenty of marble statues of Patrician women of Rome leaning on their chairs in gestures of inimitable grandeur. The praying woman of Vigna Massimo is likewise a woman of the world, as her bearing and clothes indicate (cf. "Head of Praying Woman," catacomb of Vigna Massimo, Rome). But she has not been immortalized in marble. Her features, an unknown woman painted by an unknown hand, are simply recorded in a catacomb fresco. For she was outlawed from the palaces, and became a solitary in the catacombs, a stranger on the earth (I Peter 2:11; Heb. 11:13). Her face is typical of the women who were hounded and tortured, interrogated and disrobed as a spectacle for the rabble (II Corinthians 11). She

remained strong, though she suffered untold things. Both strength and suffering can be seen in her face because in Christ she had conquered.⁵⁶

It is most instructive to study the brief biographies given in both the Old and the New Testaments of the great women of God—the stories of Deborah, Miriam, Hannah, Ruth, and above all the blessed mother Mary herself. In each case these great ladies of the Bible are referred to as "the handmaidens of the Lord." That is to say, they were women who were willing to wait upon the Lord and to seek His will for their lives. Unlike the pagan women of the surrounding heathen world of antiquity, the women of the Bible did not live to fulfill the lusts of the flesh or to serve the world and the devil, but to serve the living God. The women of the Bible are chaste, modest, faithful to their husbands and obedient to them. Unlike modern apostate women such as Mlle. Simone de Beauvoir (whose great book, *The Second Sex*, expresses the lostness of modern woman without Christ so poignantly), the women of the Bible were not ashamed of being women and they gloried in their sex. They did not spend their lives futilely pretending to be men. They were women and they were proud of it.⁵⁷

The church fathers used to love to dwell upon the comparison between Eve and Mary. As Eve had been the means of man's fall, so Mary was used by God to become the vehicle through which God in Christ redeemed the human race. Where the one was disobedient the other was obedient. "Woman," says a manuscript in the University of Cambridge, "is to be preferred to man, to wit: in material, because Adam was made from clay and Eve from the side of Adam; in place, because Adam was made outside paradise and Eve within it; in conception, because a woman conceived God, which a man could not do; in apparition, because Christ appeared first to a woman after the Resurrection, to wit, Magdalene; in exaltation, because a woman is exalted above the choirs of angels, to wit, the blessed Mary."⁵⁸ Of the importance of Mary's influence upon the reformation of womanhood in the Western world the great rationalist historian, William Lecky, says in his *The Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe*:

The world is governed by its ideals, and seldom or never has there been one which has exercised a more profound and, on the whole, a more salutary influence than the medieval conception of the Virgin. For the first time woman was elevated to her rightful position and the sanctity of weakness was recognized as well as the sanctity of sorrow. No longer the slave or toy of man, no longer associated only with ideas of degradation and of sensuality, woman rose, in the person of the Virgin Mother, into a new sphere, and became the object of a reverential homage of which antiquity had no conception. Love was idealized. The moral charm and beauty of female excellence

were fully felt. A new type of character was called into being; a new kind of admiration was fostered. Into a harsh and ignorant and benighted age this ideal type infused a conception of gentleness and of purity unknown to the proudest civilizations of the past.⁵⁹

The medieval cult of the lady became the mundane counterpart of the cult of the Virgin, and it was the invention of the medieval feudal aristocracy. In chivalry the romantic worship of a woman was as necessary a quality of the perfect knight and gentleman as was the worship of God. As Gibbon puts it: "The knight was the champion of God and the ladies." One of its most interesting manifestations was the development of a theory of "courtly love," which inspired some of the finest poetry of the Middle Ages, from the troubadours and minnesingers of France and Germany to the singers of the "dolce stil nuovo," and Dante himself in Italy. It is obvious that a theory which regarded the worship of a lady as next to that of God and conceived her as the mainspring of brave deeds, a creature half romantic, half divine, must have played a great role in counterbalancing the dogma of women's subjection to men. The process of placing women upon a pedestal had begun, and whatever we may think of the ultimate value of such an elevation, it was at least better than placing them, as the Fathers of the Church had inclined to do, in the bottomless pit.

The medieval records which have come down to us show a remarkable camaraderie between husband and wife. An obscure Flemish weaver of the sixteenth century, writing to his wife from England, signs himself with the charming phrase, "your married friend," and of medieval wives as a whole it may be said with truth, that while the literature is full of Griseldas and belles dames sans merci, life is full of married friends. The mothers, wives, and daughters of the barons and knights of feudalism are sturdy witnesses to the truth that "God Almighty made 'em to match the men." Writing of "The Position of Women in the Middle Ages," Eileen Power of Cambridge says:

It has been asserted in all ages that the sphere of woman is the home.... In the Middle Ages it was, for a variety of reasons, a very wide sphere.... While her lord was away on military expeditions, on pilgrimages, at court, on business, it was she who became the natural guardian of the fief or manager of the manor, and Europe was full of competent ladies, not spending their time in hawking and flirting ... but running estates, fighting lawsuits, and even standing sieges for their absent lords. When the nobility of Europe went forth upon a crusade it was their wives who managed their

affairs at home, superintended the farming . . . and even collected the ransom money for her husband.⁶⁰

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there had developed in medieval Europe a cult of romantic love which placed a premium upon frustration and denial, Denis de Rougemont in his *Love in the Western World* has traced the significance of the movement down to modern times. The Tristan-Isolde tale epitomized the idealization of frustrated and unfulfilled love, and there is still the assumption in modern romanticism that love thrives upon difficulties and is felt most keenly when it is most hopeless.

Most medieval marriages were arranged on economic grounds, and their primary purpose was to provide heirs to keep the feudal estates intact. Since there was no provision for men and women to seek the satisfaction of their emotional needs in marriage, both sexes sought to satisfy those needs outside of marriage in a pattern of extramarital intrigue.

Chivalry appears to have been a two-sided thing. On the one hand it was lusty and sensual. There was a great deal of overt sex-seeking with little regard for the feelings or reputation of the persons involved or of their families. On the other hand, chivalry fostered an idealization of love and the partner, which had no counterpart in the ancient world. In short, chivalry produced the concept of romantic love. Romantic love and marriage were widely regarded as incompatible with one another, but the ideal of seeking continued, and intense satisfaction in the person of a member of the opposite sex was created as a legacy to be passed on to the modern world.

The position of woman at the close of the Middle Ages was thus ambivalent. On the one hand, subjection of women to men as inferior beings was justified by ancient Germanic custom and biblical texts; on the other hand, with the increasing veneration of the Virgin Mary, adoration of women, as women, became linked to religion. To the "lady" were attributed mystic qualities of purity, gentleness, and goodness.

Such ambiguities can be reconciled by distinguishing between the status of women in different social classes. The court life of the later Middle Ages and of the Renaissance was still associated with marriages of convenience. Women relatives were married off in order to serve economic and, political advantage. Thus Lucrezia was so used by her brother Cesare Borgia. The earlier romantic cult of love developed during the Renaissance into the

licentiousness which permitted the rise of a new feminine type, the courtesan, who may be regarded as the prototype of the modern "glamor" girl.

With the growth of medieval towns and the rise of an urban middle class, there developed among tradefolk the prototype of the modern partner wife. Women as bustling, efficient business partners to their husbands played an important economic role in the medieval towns. They became members of the guilds and presided over such activities as brewing, weaving, and baking. Meanwhile, as mothers they produced children. These competent medieval women do not fit the stereotype of the downtrodden or sheltered female. Recent research tends to regard the legal disabilities of women expressed in English Common Law as a later perversion of earlier rights due primarily to the interpretations of the English jurists Coke and Blackstone.

The transformation of woman from a working partner portrayed by the *Menagier de Paris*, who wrote a book of instructions for his child wife on her future duties about 1392, into a sexual freelance, and from a distantly worshiped ideal of the medieval troubadours into a more tangible divinity, disrobed and ready for play, came about through the increase of idleness and Renaissance luxury; so it is a development that belongs mainly to the upper classes. But the change was not without democratic significance by reason of what has followed. For a profound modification of sex, love, and marriage took place between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in European civilization. Here too we may notice the destructive effects of the new nature-freedom ground-motive. At first woman becomes freed from the constraints of grace in order to achieve equality with man in all respects. Then as nature eats up grace also in this sphere of human life the destructive effects begin to become apparent in European culture, culminating in the worship of a naked prostitute as the goddess of reason in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in the French Revolution.

The artists of the Renaissance played no small part in creating the new image of woman. In medieval art there might be occasional nude figures, and nakedness itself was doubtless as common a fact of nature in the medieval household as in the common medieval baths. But the body was taken matter-of-factly. Indeed, the limited amount of water available for bodily cleanliness gave sex an association with dirtiness. Now the painters created a new image of feminine loveliness; they disrobed woman and in the very act of revealing the charms of nature they further idealized the possibilities of erotic experience. Tactile values supplemented the visual delights of rhythmic outlines; and both played a larger part in actual life.

To recognize the part these Renaissance artists played in the birth of a new image of woman, one needs to compare The Three Graces as the Middle Ages had pictured them in a twelfth century drawing with the manner in which Botticelli painted them. In his study of *The Nude*, Sir Kenneth Clark says of this comparison:

The Middle Ages pictured the Three Graces as three timid ladies huddling behind the straight lines of their single blanket yet without a suggestion of impropriety; in Botticelli's Graces, the body is not hidden but transposed into a melody of celestial beauty; celestial but humanly touching. . . . In the end it is by their human quality that Botticelli's Graces dissociate themselves from antiquity.⁶¹

It is impossible to exaggerate the revolution which the painters brought about in European man's conception of woman. Of this remarkable change Lewis Mumford writes in *The Condition of Man*:

The painter remodeled the sexual super-ego. Stimulated no doubt by the images of antiquity, the painter began to draw from the living model.... With his flair for life, the artist never forgets its sexual sources; from Rafael to Renoir, he not merely reminds other men, preoccupied with machines and books, of what is most desirable; he teaches them how to desire it.... The painter's worshipful admiration of woman added a fresh source to the erotic act itself and at the same time guarded it against that boredom which follows early satiety.... In front view and profile, standing or sitting or lying down, woman reveals as for the first time the charms men had demanded too peremptorily and captured too swiftly in the intimacies of action.

And what happens to woman? In her coy disrobing, in her frank exposure of, herself, woman in turn feels her power; her power to withhold and to give.... What the cold mirror could not reveal to woman, the painting of a Titian or a Giorgione easily disclosed; how desirable she could be.... Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain were both deeply shocked by the paintings of the Renaissance. This was perhaps a sign of their naive puritanism; but it was also a sign of their understanding of the painters' intentions. . . . These beautiful nudes were not abstract essays in design; like a Congo fetish, they served to intensify the faith of the believer. For medieval woman, her proper life as a woman began with motherhood. With baroque woman, her life was rather halted by motherhood: she was closer to the courtesan than to the virgin, and she had less authority as a wife because she had a larger place as a mistress. Sacred

and profane love; faithful and unfaithful love-what are these but the images of the same woman, clothed and unclothed, the older woman of duty and the newer woman of pleasure? The courtesan will set the style for her hair, will dictate the fashion in clothes, will command the services and attention of men .⁶²

The truth of Mumford's analysis is borne out by the fact that during the Middle Ages the ideal of feminine beauty involved the character of advanced pregnancy. In northern Europe during the Middle Ages the ideal of beauty, as we may see by the pictures of the time, was a pregnant woman, with protuberant abdomen. This is notably apparent in the work of the Van Eycks; in the Eve in the Brussels Gallery; in the wife of Arnolfini, in the highly finished portrait group in Britain's National Art Gallery. Even the virginis in the great masterpiece of the Van Eycks in the Cathedral of Ghent assume the type of pregnant woman, thus emphasizing woman's maternal role. With the Renaissance this ideal of beauty disappeared as pregnancy was, if possible, avoided rather than sought after. Woman now becomes more interested in the pleasures rather than in the duties of marriage and the responsibilities of motherhood.