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REPRESENTATIONS OF WESTERN WOMEN


This is the first volume in a projected five volume series edited by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot on the history of women in the West. Although this English text is a translation of a 1990 publication in Italian, the influence of French scholars and of the French Annales school of history is very clear. The North American edition also carries a brief two-page introduction from Natalie Zenon Davis and Joan Wallach Scott—two familiar scholars with approaches similar to those adopted in this volume.

Do not expect to find here a chronological history of women in Ancient Greece and Rome. Rather than historical narrative, each of the selections is a thematic treatment of some aspect of women’s experiences in Mediterranean Europe. It is more about “the representations of women” than about women themselves as Pauline Schmitt Pantel makes clear as an editorial introduction. Thus, for instance, Nicole Loraux explores the use of the words “theos” and “theai” in several Hellenic texts such as Hesiod’s Theogony. She searches for clues about the Greek mentality towards gender in conceptualizations of the divine. She spends considerable time reviewing the well rehearsed debate as to whether or not a Mediterranean Earth Mother preceded the eventual pantheon that models the male-oriented social genealogy of Ancient Greece.

All of this is buttressed by erudite scholarship on ancient texts and lexical usages that often prove bewildering to a reader not immersed in the field of classical studies. But in this first essay, as in the other 10 that follow, minute examination of such themes constitutes the book. In a telling observation, Loraux writes: “I am still not sure, however, that the notion of a ‘history of women’ is pertinent here, and I do not believe that such a history is possible in all periods.” (pg. 44).

No doubt in an effort to soften this self-imposed judgment, the editor of the book, Pauline Schmitt Pantel, has taken great pains to link each of the themes to a history of women by inserting a valuable one page abstract after each essay. Her comments are as judicious as they are succinct and offer an introduction to the next article. Without careful attention to these short, but critical inserts, this long book can easily sink into a prolix and disconnected collection of somebody’s latest research project. That it does not is the result...
of hard work in editing. In this volume, at least, the role of the editor is a proactive and creative exercise in scholarship.

The book is divided into three parts, unequal in length, that analyze Greek and Roman societies from their beginnings until the first several centuries of the Christian era. Part One is entitled "Feminine Models of the Ancient World." Besides the essay by Loraux, it includes analysis of Greek philosophy, Roman marriage and inheritance laws, and a review of the figures of women on some selected museum pieces.

This first part does not make a good introduction for the non-specialized reader. Overburdened with lexical references, Jungian archetypal analysis and deconstructionist polemics, one can easily lose the forest for the trees. Overall, one walks away with little more than the useful summaries provided by the editor. We are offered detailed examples for some rather simple premises: religion reflects existing social values, Plato and Aristotle thought like men, men marry women for money and art idealizes the feminine form.

This critique is not to deny that the case for each of these premises is solidly constructed by eminently capable scholars. In Yan Thomas' essay (one of three from male contributors), for instance, I learned a great deal about the Roman institutions of matrona and materfamilias. Clearly, women in that society used the means at their disposal to maximize their status and influence in a world that, legally at least, gave preference to men. This is a far more subtle approach to the vexing questions of a history of women than a chauvinistic denunciation of all ancient societies as male-dominated institutions that rendered women absolutely powerless. Moreover, the work in Thomas' article provided a nearly indispensable background for later treatments of these same issues.

Part two, "Traditional Rituals Women Share," placed the themes selected by the authors in a more recognizably historical setting. The five articles in this part of the book were the most satisfying to me. They provided a familiar sense of historical narrative while introducing stimulating conceptualizations such as "space" and "body politics." These notions, and others like them, enrich a common understanding of historical events and familiar institutions with a scrutiny that focuses upon male and female social relationships. It becomes clear that the contribution to history of Womens' Studies is a critical review of written sources from new perspectives. In ways that complement the approach of the Annales school, Womens' Studies make use of resources such as property lists, popular art, religious customs and the like to contextualize the interpretations offered in chronicles produced by the historians of the day.

Thus, for instance, I was pleased by the essay of Aline Rousselle, "Body Politics in Ancient Rome," because it demonstrated that sexual reserve and
continence for women was a Roman, not a Christian, religious paradigm (see also Monique Alexandre, pg. 415). Rousselle observes that Roman women were expected to bear three children, usually before the age of 25, and thereafter could refrain from all sexual contact with their husbands for the rest of their lives. Somberly dressed and adorned with a veil, the non-Christian Roman matrona lived in celibacy, with leisure time for arts, learning and the management of household affairs. Such an image of the noble woman gradually affected men, who sometimes adopted celibacy after providing themselves with heirs. More importantly, the mores of the aristocratic woman also extended to concubines, who sought marriage when their upper class masters finally tired of them.

All of these changes took place against a steady drop in the demographics of late Roman society. The much maligned Emperor Diocletian outlawed polygamy, even for religious groups, like Phoenicians and Jews, who protested that it was part of their own laws and continued to avoid monogamy by various subterfuges (331 ff.). The same article shows how reforms in the laws of inheritance by Augustus had some impact on increasing the free population of the Roman world, in reducing the number of abortions and in granting some of the privileges of aristocratic women to those of a lower class, especially concubines. But, as the author cogently argues, the changes also lowered the status of all women by emphasizing their reproductive role as an obligation rather than as a choice.

In her essay, Monique Alexandre criticizes the early feminist attitudes of Simone de Beauvoir in the 1960s that condemned Christianity as a major cause in the oppression of women (415ff.). Alexandre compares women in Judaism, Roman religion and Christianity. She shows that Christianity broke with the inferiorization of women that was characteristic of Jewish religion (418-421). Despite the negative judgments of St. Paul (I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-14), women had significant ministries in the apostolic church of the first century, corresponding to their roles in Roman religion. According to Alexandre, when certain Christian heresies gave prominent roles to women as priestesses and prophetesses, the institutional church responded by curtailing women’s leadership roles in the Christian communities. Yet this marginalization was not total, because it created an escape in anchoritic and monastic life where Christian women achieved autonomy.

The third part of the book examines some theoretical issues that arise from consideration of women in the Ancient European world in terms of continuing study of the history of women. Schmitt Patel suggests three: sexual asymmetry, social relations between the sexes and gender (466ff.) Sexual asymmetry is a study of unequal power relations and is familiar territory in cultural studies. Social relations between the sexes is a
sociological concept that is ultimately richer than studies of power because it discloses the adaptations and relative autonomy women are often able to achieve despite an oppressive official order.

Gender studies is the most challenging of the approaches to women’s history. It stresses the complementarity of men and women in a social and cultural construct that keeps them different, but interdependent nonetheless. Notions such “public and private space”, the former belonging to men and the latter to women, become more problematic with this approach than some literature would suggest. Study of women in history is, in the final analysis, only part of the human experience. And just as study of men is not the complete picture, neither is a study of women a substitute for a comprehensive view that puts the pieces together.

My overall assessment of this volume is that it sets a model for how to sketch out new ground in Women’s Studies. That is the value of the volume, but also its weakness. To its credit, the conclusions of the book are built upon carefully constructed historical pieces that serve as a gold mine for those in search of representations of women in history. But with this approach, even five volumes will never bring us to the women themselves, only their images. I consider this a major drawback for the venture. Hopefully, future volumes will offer more examples of the lives of real women than in this book. Here the editor includes a three page analysis of St. Perpetua’s vision before martyrdom and an excerpt from an original document to supply for this need. I believe that with more of such historical or biographical excerpts carefully placed in context, readers will acquire not only knowledge of representations but of the women themselves.

Secondly, the total absence of women from non-European sources is not absolved by the repeated explanations of the editors that their series limited to women of the West. This series is likely to set the parameters for many other studies in the future. By sheer weight of its scholarship and impressive production in publishing, the series establishes a model that future studies will have to match. It is not clear to me that the powerful image of the European women will ever be contextualized since at the onset the approach of the editors virtually excludes such outside influences. It would have been better, I think, to have promised to include other traditions within the series, incorporating other scholars into the project. Instead, the editors encourage Asian and African women to write their own histories (xviii-xix), promising encouragement, but not resources.

In summary, I consider this a valuable and important foundation study in the innovative review of women in history. The new ground that is broken here is likely to provide a rich harvest for a long time to come.

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