THE CONCEPT OF WOMAN


Louise H. Mahood

Classical philosophy has endorsed the oppression of woman through the ages in the Western world. Prudence Allen's book, The Concept of Woman, investigates philosophy's notion of woman in relation to man from the days of Aristotle in the 4th century BCE. She traces his influence on Western thought to the generation following the founding of the University of Paris in 1200 CE. Allen demonstrates that while philosophy has focused on gender distinctions, generation (human reproduction), wisdom and virtue, gender becomes a central aspect of all philosophy from the 6th century BCE. As a result of Aristotle's focus on gender, Western philosophy has played an active role in the oppression of women.

Aristotle's ideas did not surface in a vacuum, but rather developed from his critical opposition to Plato's writings. Plato understood that the individual has two aspects: the soul (or mind) and the body. And even though the soul is immaterial and therefore has a non-sexual identity, Plato was clear that a woman's soul is matter whereas the man's is form. Human reproduction associates fathering with form and mothering as the receiving of his form within her matter. Plato concludes his analysis by saying that within the soul, the man's form was superior to woman's matter. Plato believed the body to be the individual's actual physical being. Interaction of the body is different from that of the soul; to Plato, bodies of either gender were equally devalued.

For Aristotle, woman is a deformed male. She is the opposite of man. The male is typified as hot, active and creative, while the female is characterized as cold, passive and receptive. Human reproduction is perceived as a peculiar battle of the sexes during which the male's seed strives to overcome female matter to produce a male child who resembles the father. Both man and woman have the same wisdom, but woman's 'lower' irrational powers undermine her ability to be wise. Ruled by these powers, woman is unfit to do philosophy. A woman's virtue is not to be found in cleverness but in her obedience to man. For several centuries Platonic and Aristotelian notions of woman ran a race in which eventually Aristotle's ideas succeeded as 'normative' in European thought. Aristotelian notions became so entrenched at the University of Paris, that all students, whether in arts, theology, medicine or law faculties, were required to read his writings during their study.

Historically, the Church first challenged, then ultimately incorporated Aristotle into its dogma. Early monasteries, where both women and men lived in community under the rule of an abbot or abbess, fought the influence of Aristotle. During this time women studied philosophy, although little written material survived as the church expanded and began to separate the monasteries. In time, convents lost many privileges including most opportunities for women to study philosophy. For men, the secluded environment of the monastery enriched their learning opportunities, which included reading Maimonides, the first Jewish philosopher to combine Judaic thought with Aristotle. His works influenced both Saints Augustine and Thomas, who integrated theology and philosophy. Their dilemma was to justify how woman could be both a deformed male and in the image of God. As such, both said woman was in the image of God, but a less perfect image. Resurrection was woman's only hope in reaching heaven, a place where oppression of woman would not exist.

Allen cites the work of women philosophers of the Neo-Pythagorean school (400-200 BCE). They include Theano and Myia, Pythagoras' wife and daughter, and Plato's mother, Perictione. While Allen states that these scholars were important 'transitional figures' for all women studying philosophy, they did not challenge the devalued status of woman. These women emulated men in their dress and in their writings, and stressed that a virtuous woman practiced temperance and self control. Allen relates how St. Catherine of Alexandria, who became patroness of Christian philosophers, died violently at the hands of pagans during the persecutions of Maximinus in 307 CE. Another female philosopher was Hypatia, a Neo-Platonist who taught men philosophy until she also suffered violence, but at the hands of Christian monks in 415 CE in Alexandria. Allen observes that being a woman and a philosopher was a dangerous business indeed.

Allen's meticulous investigation has uncovered little-known sources, and extracts much from the well-known. She makes thorough use of her sources by continually quoting from the writings. While that permits the sources to speak for themselves, and introduces readers to the works of women of antiquity, it tends to disrupt the flow of the book. Allen graphically and succinctly presents philosophers' perceptions of gender-distinction and human reproduction. Readers will find her use of charts helpful. It is ironic that Allen does not challenge the assumptions that male philosophers...
hold of woman as gender-distinct from man. The fact that ancient male philoso-
phy concentrated on gender and repro-
duction hardly permits any appreciation of woman as thoughtful or educable. However it was that the male philosopher
understood the nature of sex-distinction, it became the basis for his theory of a
woman’s inability to have wisdom and practice virtue.

Still, in Prudence Allen’s book, readers will discover a fascinating collection of
women’s writings. These taken alone have their own merit, but her synthesis
will provide a basis from which women will want to study further, concerning
Western women’s attitudes toward woman.

THE WILD WOMAN: AN INQUIRY INTO THE
ANTHROPOLOGY OF AN IDEA

By Sharon W. Tiffany and Kathleen J.
Adams. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman

Stephen Katz

Sharon W. Tiffany and Kathleen J.
Adams, both anthropologists, commit
themselves to demystifying the ‘Wild
Woman,’ a powerful and tenacious image
which expresses a broad range of sexually
oppressive practices. The ‘Wild Woman’
is a difficult idea to pin down because it
appears at the intersection point of history
and anthropology, and of time and space.

This provides the initial challenge of the
book, and the authors use it to analyze how the nature of women is a social and
historical construction. Unfortunately, they relegate that construction to the nature of men, hence diminishing the book’s accomplishments. In other words, the book’s arguments rightly reject the biased depiction of female nature as being ‘wild,’ but ultimately support its logic by retaining the ‘savagery’ of a male nature.

The ‘Wild Woman’ is presented in two related ways. First, she is an image and a
metaphor created by European culture and its colonial and anthropological prac-
tices. Secondly, the ‘Wild Woman’ is a
literary device the authors employ to ar-
ticulate a variety of stereotypes which share a common origin in 19th-century
relations of sexual inequality. Both meth-
odological positions establish their mean-
ing through familiar, dualist sets of equiva-
cences and oppositions. For example,
“Just as the Wild Woman was invented, so too was the exotic, the primitive,
and the Third World.” Or, “The Wild
Woman conveys Western preoccupation with implicit contrasts of self/other, male/female, civilized/savage, white/black, and Western/non-Western...,” and, “The Wild Woman — pure/vermuted, moral/imoral, fair/dark, civilized/savage — suggests compelling metaphors of ambivalence and conflict.” Both in meta-
phorical (literary and anthropological
writings) and concrete (historical and
colonial practices) conditions, the ‘Wild
Woman’ exemplifies sexual oppression and its reproduction in the idealism of
dualism.

Chapter One is a creative selection of material which surveys how 19th-century
scientific and anthropological discourses combined androcentrically to construct a
distorted but universal ‘woman.’ Chap-
ters Two and Three continue this theme and approach the cultural anthropological
literature, where the passive and power-
less ‘Wild Woman’ appears also as ‘vic-
tim,’ ‘savage,’ ‘man-eater,’ and as an
exchangeable commodity. Generally this
is a good indictment of anthropiology, and of how its pseudo-science masks its ro-
manic and misogynous biases.

The examples used vary in their effec-
tiveness. For example, I find it a tight
squeeze to fit the imagery of the ‘Wild
Woman’ into Evans-Pritchard’s work on
the Sudanese Nuer. It is true that his
1930’s work situates women as objects
controlled through the Nuer’s patrilineal
kinship organization, in which women’s roles are often ignored or dismissed. But
this is not the same thing as Evans-
Pritchard empowering women with a (false) ‘wildness.’ In fact, I read his work at
that time as being more limited by his
descriptive functionalist analysis than by
a sex-biased ideology.

However, the authors are quite correct
in their criticism of the Amazonian Yan-
omama ethnography in which Napoleon
Chagnon depicts a violently debased and
sexually oppressive way of life. (It is no
wonder that Chagnon’s work is so fa-
voured by sociobiology and related ide-
ologies where ‘sexual behaviour’ is noth-
ing more than currently dominant gender relations transformed into ‘laws of na-
ture.’)

The discursive spectrum from biology to
pornography shares an image of women as being irrational, uncontroll-
able, and corrupting. Women’s ambiva-
 lent ‘nature’ is supposedly both nurture
and provoke men, who in turn respond
with control and brutalization. Hence, it is
no surprise to find such imagery in eth-
nography, where the ‘Wild Woman’ sub-
verts her own primitive community.

Chapter Four, the last main chapter of
the book, is really a protracted metaphor
connecting the colonization of America to
the domination of women, with a focus on
Guyana (the reason for which is not really
clear except that it seems to be Kathleen J.
Adams’ field area). The chapter explores the
myths, stories of naturalists and trav-
ellers, and finally anthropology, but the
argument is circuitous and lacks the acu-
ity of the critique of Chagnon’s work in
the previous chapter. I think the reason is
that the authors rely excessively on their
treatment of the role of metaphor, and
strain their dualist sets of equivalences
and oppositions. For example, to equate
America to woman, the earth to women’s
bodies, mining to rape, the chaos of the
jungle to female sexuality, etc., reduces
all colonial practices to sexual categories.

Here is where the creative scheme which
provided the book with its flexibility and
humanism begins to create its most criti-
cal problem, which is an essentialism of
its terms.

The authors began the book with a
genealogy of (androcentric) anthropo-
logy, and managed to slide the ‘Wild
Woman’ between reality and metaphor.
This balance is regrettably lost; as more of
the emphasis is placed on metaphorical
imagery, the ‘Wild Woman’ becomes
more of an essentialist entity and less of a
key point of articulation for a number of
sex-biased practices. This leads to the
problem mentioned earlier, which is that
the ‘Wild Woman’ is circumscribed strictly by male determination. In other
words, much of the progress made toward
demystifying the ‘Wild Woman’ is sacri-
ficed to the re-mystification of the ‘sav-
age man.’ The ‘Wild Woman’ is distill-
ed to a sexual fixation created by men. Men
 dominate knowledge, wield power, con-
 trol the world, categorize humanity, and
 transform women into ‘Wild Women.’

What makes men do such things is not
properly addressed, nor is the question of
the exploitative relations non-Western
men have endured through colonialism
and their reduction to savagery in ethnog-
nography and popular literature.

Throughout the book’s final chapter we
are continually reminded that the concrete
oppression of women, metamorphosed
into the imagery of the ‘Wild Woman’,
has been perpetuated by men because of
the nature of men. For example:

Men invented the Wild Woman, and in