

# WOMEN LEADERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Helen Cairns

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter stems from a Masters' dissertation submitted in the subject Biblical Studies in November 1995. The title of the research was I Timothy 2:8-3:1(a) – Women's ordination in the light of the Christian self-definition of women in Ephesus. A part of this research included an appraisal of the status of women in Asia Minor. Historically, Asia Minor was subject to successive cultural influences from other geographic areas, particularly Rome, Greece and Palestine. The focus of the appraisal was the Jewish community established in Ephesus. The premise is that a variety of forms of Judaism existed which were shaped not only by Hellenization and Romanization but particularly by the cult of Artemis. There is much to suggest that women were emancipating themselves from the bonds of patriarchy not only in the wider society but also in the cults and the Judaeo-Christian church of the first century.

## THE PROBLEM: WHY ARE SO FEW WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS IN THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY?

Women make up more than half of the membership of the church universal and yet they have been excluded from meaningful participatory roles for centuries. This was not the case during the earliest origins of the church where women were encouraged to be equal co-workers for Christ. In this paper I would like to outline some of the problems and paradoxes regarding the status of women in antiquity as it appears through the window of the text of I Timothy, especially verses 11 and 12 which the Revised Standard Version translates in this way:

*'Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.'*

## TEXTS TAKEN OUT OF LITERARY AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND INTERPRETED TO ACCOMMODATE MALE TRANSLATORS AND COMMENTATORS

The interpretation and application of the above and related texts<sup>1</sup> impacted on the universal church throughout history, including the twentieth century, and has led to the exclusion of women from ministry and leadership. This is incongruous as Christianity was a prime mover in abolishing the social distinctions between Jew and Gentile, owner and slave and male and female. Commentators have often used this text as proof that a woman's place was in the home ('barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen') and if she had any function in the church, apart from being supportive of, subordinate and submissive to her husband, it was to make tea and arrange the flowers. For example Kelly (1963) and Reuss (1969) reach the conclusion that Paul is admonishing women who neglect their housework and that women's salvation was dependent upon their acceptance of their motherhood role. Moo (1980) reasoned that women are excluded from important ministries such as preaching, church administration and leadership because they

*'... must not engage in activities which have the effect of disrupting created sexual role relationships and should never regard tasks such as raising children and managing homes as second-rate. Indeed, it is in devoting herself to such activities consonant with her created role that the Christian woman experiences the salvation to which she has been called.'*

I do not agree that it was Paul's intention to exclude women from ministry or for that matter to keep them in the permanent seclusion of the home, nor was it the intention to establish a pattern for church structures but rather to affirm the identity of first century Christian women. Christianity was diametrically opposed to the prevailing patriarchal patterns of life in antiquity (Cairns, 1995:173–176).

### THE LITERARY CONTEXT – THE WORLD WITHIN THE TEXT

A literary-communicative approach was used to construe the world within the text. The problem with New Testament letters in particular, is that they reflect only half of the original conversation in which both the author

and recipients '...shared a common knowledge of the specific persons, places, and behaviours referred to in the letters, but we are often ignorant of those specifics' (Malina, 1990:7).

This letter intended 'to do' something rather than simply 'to say' something to the hearers – in fact I maintain that this was a unique type of letter – a letter of social reconstruction. A main theme was the justification of Paul and Timothy as identity shapers – in other words to prescribe beliefs, values and norms for those who share 'in Christ' as contrasted to those who were 'outside Christ'. The purpose was thus to create a new identity for Christian believers. The text makes reference to various categories of women: older women, older widows, younger widows and young unmarried women.<sup>2</sup>

In this text Paul addresses a group of women, God-fearers and Gentiles, a group of wealthy widows likely to be the benefactors or financial supporters of this community and especially of itinerant charismatics such as Paul and his travelling companions. What were these first century Christian women like? What was the nature of the society in which they lived?

### **THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: THE WORLD BEYOND THE TEXT, ESPECIALLY THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS WORLD**

The presupposition is that the recipients of this letter were in Ephesus, Asia Minor (1 Tm 1:3). The culture in Ephesus, Asia Minor, was a product of successive influences from Judaism, Hellenism and Romanism. It was only towards the middle of the third century CE that Rabbinic Judaism and Catholic Christianity had emerged with more or less separate identities from a common source or matrix. It is commonly agreed that towards the end of the first century CE Christianity in Ephesus was hardly recognisable as distinct from Judaism (Moxnes, 1980:7). Horsley (1992:122) is of the opinion that Christians could not have been 'visible to non-Jewish outsiders as anything other than a charismatic Jewish group.'

### **HELLENISTIC WOMEN**

Greek society was hierarchical and the master of the oikos was the head of the family or kyrios. Women could not own anything themselves and in

their husband's absence on account of either death or military service they looked after his property. The oikos also included outsiders, either slaves who were quickly assimilated into the family, or visitors. Women led secluded lives and their chief contact with the world outside their homes came through both the duties of their sons or their husbands as well as religious activities (Webster, 1973:53). Not only were women active in the cults of women and goddesses and in the cults where male deities were worshipped, but men were often excluded from mystery plays, agricultural and fertility rituals. An example is the cult of Despòina where women had access to the cult all year while men could enter only once a year.

Witherington (1986:6) warns that it is not possible to generalise about the status of women particularly in places like Athens where there were three categories of women: citizens, concubines and companions. The concubine's position was midway between wife and companion. Her main function was to care for the male's personal (especially sexual) needs. Companions were more than just sexual partners; they had to be well-versed in art and philosophy. They had few civic rights but enjoyed a great deal of social freedom and access to education. What about wives? Marriage was monogamous. This can be seen as an advantage over Judaism where polygamy was frequently practised. Witherington (1988:6–9) maintains that wives were valued solely for their ability to produce heirs as can be deduced from this quote from Pseudo-Demosthenes:

*'Mistresses we keep for the sake of our pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our person, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households.'*

Similarly Euripides portrays their domestic plight:

*'Surely of all creatures that have life and wit, we women are the most unhappy, who first must buy ... a husband...but gain for our lives a master!'*

It may be deduced from the following that women were more educated during the Hellenistic period. Swidler (1976:18–19) provides the following data:

- In Hellenistic Egypt there were more women who could sign their names than men;

- The Hellenistic novel was written for the female reading population;
- Plato's writings argued in favour of equality for women with men. At least two female disciples of Plato were known;
- Theophrastus, a follower of Aristotle, also had a female disciple as well as a female opponent;
- Women played a prominent role in the school of Epicurus as disciples and as teachers (343–270 BCE);
- The Stoic philosophers promoted the status of women. They stressed the worth of the individual woman as well as the need for her education and strict monogamy as well as the 'notion of marriage as a spiritual community of two equals'.

The polis was a male-dominated association where men made all the decisions affecting the community (Boardman 1991:201). It was characteristically composed of predominantly all-male groups, associations and clubs. Women had very little say in the affairs of Athenian society. Inscriptional evidence indicates that Macedonian women were better off than their counterparts in Athens. They had cities named after them and were sometimes given the honour of 'inheritable civic rights'. Some women founded clubs and participated in social organizations. Women here functioned as both 'politarchs' and 'wage earners'. The popularity of Hellenistic queens also '...had an influence on Macedonian women who were not of royal blood ...' (Witherington 1988:13).

Undoubtedly most Greek women continued in their traditional roles without education or opportunity to exercise authority outside the sphere of the home yet there are indications of emancipation of women from bonds of patriarchy. Macedonian women were no longer restricted. Women's freedom and social mobility had a great effect on Asia Minor and Egypt as Hellenisation continued to spread to the East.

## ROMAN WOMEN

Behind the culture of Rome was the extraordinarily developed culture of the Etruscans which accorded women pre-eminence (Swidler, 1976:22). The Etruscan women enjoyed male company and reclined at banquets alongside men, attended dances, concerts, sports events and even

presided at boxing matches, chariot races and acrobatic displays. Their cultural heir, the Roman woman was mistress in her own household and shared the responsibility of the religious cult with her husband. State-supported religions included the Vestal Virgins and the oriental cults such as Isis and the Magna Mater. Vestal Virgins owned property and had certain powers and privileges not granted to other women, for example, they could remit the sentence of a prisoner. They were considered so trustworthy that they were entrusted with important documents for safe keeping.

The different cults<sup>3</sup> catered for different stages of a woman's life. They were used by Rome '...to promote socially desirable behaviour'. In his social reforms Augustus promoted those cults which encouraged chastity, childbearing and fidelity. Another possible motive for the promotion of cults was to eliminate public and private situations where women were independent of men. If this was a motive of Augustus, we can detect a counter movement in the thrusts for emancipation of women.<sup>4</sup>

It is suggested by Witherington (1988:21) that Roman men feared the cults of Isis in particular as, unlike the traditional cults which were designed to promote the needs of the state, these cults promised healing, blessing, understanding and sympathy thereby meeting the religious and emotional needs of women. Increased trade and contact with the East facilitated the introduction of oriental religions, particularly the cults of Isis and Mithras and, in due course Christianity. Prominent Roman women were converted to the Christian religion. Although Balsdon (1962:248) maintains that the earliest converts to Christianity came from the lower social classes, there were at the very least two women of distinction. One of them, Pomponia Graecina, was the wife of Aulus Plautius, commander of the force which invaded Britain (Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, 13,32,2). The new deities were intimately concerned with the personal life of the individual and quite unlike the Roman gods, who were like powerful absentee landlords from whom the best that you could hope was that they would leave you alone if you paid your rent correctly and at the proper time.

Isis benefited the lower classes and women most of all as they were given the same status as others and equal status with men as can be seen by a number of inscriptions. The following remark by Witherington (1988:22) is pertinent:

*'it is certainly more than coincidence that the rise of the cult of Isis in the later Republic period coincided with the increase in women's liberation in Rome. It is likely that these two trends fostered and furthered each other, and it was perhaps in reaction against this that Augustus undertook his ill-fated attempts at moral and religion reform.'*

The society of imperial Rome included many educated and capable women who were knowledgeable in literature and current affairs. Roman women were definitely in advance of their Greek and Egyptian counterparts, who had few political rights. We find the names of women who were running for office on the walls of Pompeii. Women were involved in business and social life. However, even if women were deeply involved in civic and legal affairs they were not allowed to vote or hold public office. Women in Rome had more freedom than those in Greece who in turn had more freedom than those in the East (Swidler, 1976:22–26).

Balsdon also points out that although no woman ever ruled, Roman women were immensely powerful behind the scenes. The most influential matrons appeared to be the wives of the emperors, for instance, Livia, the wife of Augustus, was renowned for her administrative abilities and her financial investments in property in Asia Minor.

A hundred years or more before the end of the Republic women rebelled against a marriage system in which they were fettered to their husbands, unable to throw off the chains. 'They rebelled too, against a senseless austerity... Women emancipated themselves ... They acquired liberty ... it is a thousand pities that there survives no woman's record of her own outlook ... Few women wrote books and of the books written none have survived' (Balsdon, 1962:17).

### **WOMEN IN ASIA MINOR**

There is little doubt that the women of Asia Minor in the first century had firstly been influenced by Hellenism and then to some perhaps lesser extent by Romanism. Jewish and other influences also played a role. The extent of such assimilation of cultures is indeterminable. It is posited that Asian women were a unique amalgam of these cosmopolitan forces, yet they remained distinctly Asian (from Asia Minor). Very little has been writ-

ten about the everyday life of women in Asia Minor. Usually researchers have not gone beyond an examination of cultic life.

In Asia Minor women were granted more rights and prominence also due to the growth and spread of the cult of Isis into the region. 'It was a manifestation of a general Egyptian attitude that a woman should be accepted as a man's equal in most respects' (Witherington (1988:13–16). Trebilco (1991:14) points out that this attitude is best reflected in the cult of Amon where a woman could hold office and such a woman was called a 'god's wife'.

The primary deities in Asia Minor were feminine. Maternal and fertility aspects featured prominently. The fertility-promoting qualities of Artemis played an important part in the lives of women, ensuring their physical safety during childbirth. Cultic statues emphasized features such as giving birth. Artemis, Cybele and Isis were goddesses who claimed to provide protection during childbirth. Paul claims similar 'salvation' for the initiate to Christianity – preservation in times of giving birth (1 Tm 2:15).

The cult of Artemis in Ephesus stood as the bastion of feminine supremacy in religion for the first three centuries of the Roman Empire (Kroeger & Kroeger, 1992:50–51). During festivals and holy days women who were usually confined to their household became actively involved in public processions and festivities. Artemis is referred to as the goddess who has 'lordship over supernatural powers' and was also acclaimed *Kuria Soteira* and heavenly goddess. Although the Artemis religion was not forced on the people it was the focus of everyday life. This cult and its activities epitomized the cultural and religious spirit of the city. The goddess owned land and water estates in the city's extensive territorium and the revenues were used in the upkeep of the cult. This cult provided Ephesus with economic security; it was also a treasury and a major tourist attraction (Kroeger & Kroeger 1992:54). Artemis' supporters were not expected to belong exclusively to their cult in the same way as Jews were. It was often politically, socially and economically expedient to align with other cults. By association with other deities those divine attributes that Artemis did not possess could be borrowed and assumed (Horsley, 1992:155; Meyer & Sanders, 1980:106; Rietzenstein, 1978:184).

This factor is a key to understanding the text in question. Artemis was the

supreme supernatural power in Asia Minor. The women addressed by Paul were converts to the Judaeo-Christian faith but hung on to their beliefs in the powers of Artemis. Segal (1977) maintains that Paul was branded a heretic by Rabbinic Judaism for preaching about two powers in heaven – Jahweh and Jesus Christ. The Gentile women accommodated a third power – Artemis. It is highly likely that the debates and 'other doctrines' referred to in I Timothy 1:3 allude to arguments over which deity was pre-eminent or from which one the other emanated. It is this debate that Paul wishes to silence in order to qualify the nature and identity of adherents to Christianity.

Arnold (1989:122) points out that very little attention has been paid to the impact which this cult could have had on New Testament writings. He avers that this is an oversight as his study on Ephesians shows how the author emphasized 'powers' as a reference to the domination of the Ephesian mind and spirit by the overbearing cultic activities of the city's goddess, Artemis.

Women were active in social, political and financial services to their city, as is indicated by the inscriptions honouring them. Van Bremen (1983:225) observes that: 'Women thus seem to have encroached upon the traditionally sacrosanct male-dominated sphere of public life and city politics'. Not only were they active in many spheres of public life in Asia Minor, they could attain the leading position of strategos within the city. Women were also involved in the federation of cities which were responsible for the imperial cult and also discussed matters of general interest concerning the administration of the province. We also find a woman with the title of Asiarch which was the foremost title in Asia. Trebilco (1991:124) points out that the prominence of women was most noticeable on the west coast of Asia Minor which would include Ephesus.

From this brief comparison between Roman women and women in the rest of the Roman Empire, it may be noted that Roman women had 'both more and less freedom' than women in other parts of the ancient Mediterranean. This would depend on which aspect of their life is used as a comparison. Women were considered to lack the knowledge to deal with affairs beyond the home. It may be true that they had considerable power behind the scenes, but they nevertheless, did not compare

favourably with their counterparts in Asia Minor, who were able to hold political offices (Witherington, 1988:18–23). Although the majority of women were probably content to retain their roles of domesticity within the household, the society of imperial Rome included some women who were both influential and educated. In fact, wealthy women seem to have created problems for their husbands, as Plutarch's comment illustrates: 'All other men rule their wives; we rule all other men, and our wives rule us.'

There was evidence of change in the social position of women especially among the more educated, elite sections of society. It is not surprising that Christianity with its egalitarian emphasis appealed to women who now sought equal association with men in cultic activities, which involved not only preparing meals but sharing them, not only administration of their household but naturally administration of the household cult and civic affairs.

### WOMEN IN JUDAISM

The following facets of Jewish life are drawn from researchers who have focused on life in Palestine. It is assumed that some of the information will also apply to the distinctly Jewish communities in Ephesus.

In spite of the diversity of the religious climate it would appear that there was a growing attraction felt among the educated section of the population for monotheism and the many gods in the pantheon came to be regarded as attributes of only one god. Bauer (1971:89) posited that the communities established by Paul in Asia Minor were mostly Gentile. It is therefore very likely that large numbers of Gentiles either adopted a monotheistic faith or incorporated Jahweh into their own pantheon of gods. Christian groupings were Judaistic (though not in the same light as Judaism is viewed to-day). Judaism was inclusive by nature and encouraged proselytes from the Graeco-Roman cults, both men and women.

Women occupied leadership roles. They were honoured in tomb inscriptions with the titles *mater synagogae*, *presbyterissa* and *archisynagogissa*. Although an exception rather than the rule, it is certain that women func-

tioned at all levels of Jewish society particularly in Asia Minor (Brooten, 1982). It is evident that some Jewish communities in Asia Minor provided women with an unusually prominent place within synagogues. A woman archisynagogos had a say in the community's activities as the Jewish synagogues did not only embrace worship but all aspects of Jewish life. It would appear that during the first century women held offices in the synagogues and were given more equal treatment than in later centuries when synagogues separated men and women. Trebilco (1991) and Brooten (1982) examine titles given to Jewish women. Brooten (1982:5-95) cites nineteen Latin and Greek inscriptions in which women are named as 'heads of synagogues', 'leader', 'elder', 'mother of the synagogue' and 'priestess'. Although scholarship has tended to accord these titles honorific status, Brooten asserts that they were functional. Six ancient Greek inscriptions have been found in which women bear the title *presbytera/presbuteres/presbyterissa*.

This improved status of women was not dependent upon their relationship to men. They did not gain it second-hand through either a husband or father who was a priest. It is also clear from Acts 16:12b-14;17:4 that women were involved in synagogues. Paul and Silas went to Philippi where as usual they looked for a synagogue, the term here is *proseuch* (Ac 16:13;16). They knew where to find a gathering of female believers, at a place near the river which was convenient for baptisms. Men were obviously not excluded, as some of the households would have undoubtedly included males (Ac 16:15). Brooten also suggests that in the light of so many women joining Judaism, women may well have constituted the majority in some cases. The attraction of so many women may indicate the relaxation of restrictive practices. Scholarship should revise its attitude towards ancient Judaism or some of its forms and consider the appeal to women that these may have had. Perhaps women were attracted to Jewish Christianity due to the presence of active Jewish female title-bearers as this form of Judaism was less restrictive than the other forms.

New Testament references point to the participation of women in the services which would have been impossible if they were in a separate room, a gallery or behind a screen (Ac 16:13-14;17:4). On the other hand, in traditional Jewish circles, the Talmud did not permit women to pray or say grace or a benediction over men. In addition women and slaves could

not be included in the number required to recite the Common Grace. The Talmud ((bBer.47b) states: that '...an infant in the cradle may be counted for the zimmun' (the number needed for the recitation of the grace when three or more are together for a meal). However women were not counted for this purpose. Therefore in these synagogues women were regarded as having less status than a male child or a slave.

A typical example of the misogynist attitudes prevalent in Jewish literature is provided by Ben Sira who advises men to look out for women as they have only one ambition which is '...to lead men astray sexually'. The concept of sexual sin was found in the Pseudepigrapha, where the Book of Adam and Eve (Swidler, 1976:47) was probably composed in the first century CE by a diaspora Jew and the prevalent idea that sexual sin was the mother of evils already prevailed. The focus is on Eve as the primary sinner and source of death. Other books such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Book of the Jubilees focused on the sin of fornication and the need to avoid women out of fear. In spite of the improvement of women's status in other cultures, Jewish literature 'continued to show negative attitudes' (Swidler 1976:29-54). Women were treated with suspicion and blamed for male weaknesses in respect of sexual arousal.

Jewish women seldom appeared in public especially in the cities. When a Jewish woman ventured out in public, she always had her head covered with only one eye exposed. Going without a head-covering was considered so shameful that it was grounds for divorce without the obligation to pay the *kethuba*.

It was forbidden for a man to talk to a woman in the street. Even a husband was told not to talk too much to his wife except to procure sexual favour. In conversations, the wife addressed her husband as 'rabbi', a form used by slaves and disciples meaning 'my master', whereas the husband addressed his wife as 'my daughter'. Women did not usually eat with men when there was a guest present and similarly they did not serve men. However, they did take part in the preparation of meals. There are possible indications that these customs changed with Christian revision because at the agape meal women were present. In the light of the preceding information from Swidler (1976) it is concluded that in certain sections of this tradition women led a harem existence, secluded from society.

The practice of polygamy was prevalent among the Jews and effected a severely inferior status for women as they were treated as property and owned in much the same manner as slaves (Swidler, 1976:144–148). The wife was considered the husband's possession and therefore adultery by the wife constituted a damage to and violation of his exclusive right to her. Adultery was considered one of the three capital sins (idolatry and murder being the other two) and hence merited the most severe punishment, namely death. The usual punishment was stoning, burning and strangulation.

Generally in Judaism women were barred from participating fully and actively in cultic life because of natural bodily functions such as menstruation and childbirth. During this period of uncleanness it is likely that another member of the extended family would have to take over the duties of preparing the food or alternatively the family ate its ordinary food in a condition of cultic uncleanness. It is probable that this type of restriction was not so strictly enforced in Christian circles.

Swidler (1976:32) argues that the fact that no biblical literature was written by and for women, is in itself an indication that women were regarded as being of a lesser and inferior status to men. Biblical writings also often denigrated women. All this contributed to a woman's lack of self-worth. Moreover there was the fact that a female's existence was viewed in the light of her relationship with and usefulness to a male. Samuel ben Unya said that a woman before marriage was merely a shapeless lump only transformed into a useful vessel by marriage. Rabbi Hirsch wrote that women should not be allowed to visit the market place due to a fear of misbehaviour of the men. As a result many men would lock up their wives within the confines of the house. Hillel, a prominent Rabbi of the first century CE, said: 'Many women, much witchcraft'. Other Rabbis said that women possess four traits: they are greedy, eavesdroppers, slothful and envious. The best-known Rabbinic teaching indicating the misogynist attitudes of the rabbis is the daily prayer: 'Praise be to God that he has not created me a Gentile! Praise be to God that he has not created me a woman! Praise be to God that he has not created me an ignoramus!' This is by no means an obscure prayer as there are at least three separate direct quotations of this prayer in ancient rabbinic collections.

Women were considered to have inferior status, the same as children or

slaves. Women, children and slaves were grouped together as they were all less than full Jewish citizens. A woman's status was equal to that of a child and even a male child had more rights than she did. Acquisition of a woman included three components, namely money, documentation and sexual connection. On the other hand a slave was acquired by money and documentation only.

In marriage, women were often treated as possessions or sex objects; their status and economic stability depended on their husbands. In the event of his death a widow had to be taken in and supported by a husband's closest relatives. This led to a large number of women in a household. The majority of Jewish women were illiterate and like their Roman counterparts destined to live out their lives in the seclusion of their houses. Strict rules and regulations regarding a woman's appearance and behaviour in public meant limited freedom and contact with men, even her husband.

It may be concluded that the status of women was not equal to that of men but that there was severe female inferiority and intense misogyny in both civil and religious areas of life. Judaism did not follow the pattern of the societies and cultures around it but ran counter to the trends of Hellenism and Roman cultures. The new form of Judaism, namely Christianity, that emerged in the first century would no doubt have been particularly attractive to Jewish and non-Jewish women who, according to Broton, were already involved in significant cultic and civic positions in the more emancipated localities such as Asia Minor.

### **EVIDENCE OF WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION BOTH IN CIVIC AND CULTIC CIRCLES**

The fact that a few prominent women were able to rise above their station in life is truly remarkable. It is significant that this occurred particularly in Asia Minor. It is unlikely that there was much upward social mobility for women in Palestine. The rigid form of Judaism formed the matrix and engendered an opposite form of Judaism – namely Christianity. There was no obvious sudden schism but the genesis of a type of Judaism that was on the opposite end of the spectrum from that described above.

Paul was the shaper of a 'distinct religion' and was one of the exponents of 'anti-Jewish' aspects of life. His sentiments found fertile ground among the Diaspora Jewish communities, some of whom found Jewish practices restrictive and difficult to maintain far away from Palestine. One might label this freer and more liberal strand of Judaism Pauline Christianity. Baptism was common for proselytes into the Jewish faith. However, it is noteworthy that Paul includes an allusion to gender in this ritual as outlined in Galatians 3:27–28. The baptism formula which was pronounced on a woman's entry into the Christian faith was not gender-specific. This definitely had implications for Christian women. It meant they could remain single or assume roles other than wife or mother, or obtain a new status based on their serving function. In Galatians 3:28 Paul talks about equal rights of Jews, slaves and women. After initiation they are all free. In naming these people Paul targets the 'disenfranchised' in Hellenistic cities, slaves and women. In this inverted symbolism, slaves and their masters were social equals 'in Christ'. Paul does not advocate the abolishment of slavery however. He simply redefines slaves' identity in terms of their relationships to other members of the community.

'In Christ' there were no distinctions between male and female, a statement that could strike at the heart of the value system whereby all persons in the Mediterranean world were classified according to the values of 'honour and shame' that distinguished male and female. This hierarchical, patriarchal family structure was inverted in the relationships of the church or 'the household of God'. In everyday Mediterranean life, women had certain spheres of influence mainly connected with the home and household affairs. Women were 'embedded' in men's honour and value system – this system, to some extent, still functions and is perpetuated in our own society today. However one must caution against modern attempts to understand this statement of Paul in terms of modern egalitarianism instead of a liminal or transitional status of the entrant into the church.

Perhaps the most shocking and unusual ritual but, at the same time, liberating activity among Christians was the celebratory meal, the eucharist. Feeley-Harnik (198:2–10) notes that food is '...one of the principal ways in which differences among social groups are marked.' Thus social differences either in gender, age or social class can be seen in differentiated dietary rules. Yet Christian men and women ate and drank together,

though women may have been served by men. Rohrbaugh (1991:146) construes the Christian community as having been socially inclusive to an unusual degree, thus running the risk of being rejected by other '...social networks on which their positions depended'. He also concludes that if '... the Christian community provided a social haven for the poor, it occasioned social disaster for the rich'. The usual status markers and differences between rich and poor were withdrawn. In addition, the fact that the benefactor was willing to take on the role of a servant represents a new concept of leadership and patronage.

Fiorenza (1978:158) perceives the significance of the church gathering within the home (the sphere of women) and it is within this location that equal opportunities for women were provided. She adds that wealthy women were notorious for opening up their premises and houses to Oriental cults and their associated worship (1 Cor 16:19; Rm 16:5). The use of the symbolic forms such as 'household of God' and 'body' serve to establish a quality of social relations that is based on a mutuality of affection and responsibility rather than on the power of superordinate over subordinates. Paul and others founded a community but once it was established they moved on leaving it in the hands of the 'owner of the house'. The structure of the administration evolved from the roles (offices) performed by the individual members and only later became 'vested in the office' (Petersen, 1985:159–237).

Brooke (1992:257–277) argues on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, that Paul's primary intention was not to enforce a subordinate role on women. Pauline Christianity brought a new understanding of the 'basic patterns of creation'. Women are not subordinate to men but have a 'mutual claim, and even a mutual rule over each other'. Paul advocates a '...mutual authority, a notion which is a far cry from most Jewish and pagan attitudes to marriage, where man is the dominant partner'.

### **IN THE LIGHT OF THESE CONTEXTS HOW SHOULD THE TEXT BE UNDERSTOOD?**

Within Christianity women were accorded administrative and other functions within the context of the cult or worship. This included prophesying

and teaching, at the very least teaching other women. However, some of the teaching propounded by certain women was considered erroneous by Paul (1 Tm 2:12). A pronouncement in 1 Timothy was made to counter the incorrect teaching on one of the following issues: the implications of a creation order, an over-emphasis on celibacy as a means of heightened spiritual experience on the part of women or, as Kroeger and Kroeger (1992:103), advocate that women were forbidden to teach that woman was the 'originator of man'.

In Pauline Christianity women were not only accepted as equal, but they also had a sense of worth and recognition that may not be overlooked. Monogamy and prohibition of divorce were to women's advantage. In marriage relationships instead of submission on the part of the wife alone, Paul now advocates mutual submission of both husband and wife thereby curtailing the husband's authority. Paul addressed all members of the community including women when he used such terms as 'the brethren' which was inclusive of women. Women were active at all levels within the Christian congregations. Nympha in Colossians 4:15 would have functioned alongside men in the 'fullest' capacity. Women became co-workers with Paul (Ac 18:18). Apollos in Ephesus was instructed by husband and wife. The wife is mentioned first (Ac 18:27). Other female co-workers include Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rm 16:12); Phoebe (Rm 16:2); Euodia and Syntyche (Phlm 2:2-4); Junias (Rm 16:7). The role of women in the Pauline movement is much greater and much more nearly equal to that of men than in contemporary Judaism (Meeks 1983:81). It was not until the second century that roles became fully institutionalized. Paul's co-workers had a wide range of functions: letter-writing and -carrying, encouragement, establishment of house-churches, teaching and evangelizing. In the end, women were actively involved in the ongoing ministry of the early church and all offices/functions/leadership roles were available to all Christians.

On examination of the roles played by Christian women in the wider society as portrayed in Luke-Acts we note that Lydia (Ac 16:14-15) played an important role as a benefactor. She probably '...belonged to a number of active working women of relatively low status, but who had the opportunity to enhance their status through their own work and initiative'. There is also a member of the elite, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. Luke portrays them as patrons who serve (Lk 8:3).

The Christian groups were probably made up of members from many different groups, elite and non-elite (Moxnes, 1991:267). Christianity would have been an unusual institution in the first century as it afforded social mobility on an upward scale. Usually the elite and non-elite members of the city did not mix. Meeks (1986:113) maintains that '[w]omen did play a very large part in the mission and patronage and leadership of the Pauline groups. In fact as a result the second century leaders...wrote pseudonymously to reaffirm old Aristotelian rules of wifely submission...'

Bearing in mind the amount of attention given in this discourse to women, it becomes increasingly unlikely that such a liberating and encouraging document for women would have been written in the second century, at a time when the male elite were attempting to put women back in their place. In this letter Paul makes some liberating statements with regard to further education for women and promotes their roles in the household as those who are worthy care-givers, deacons and servants in the 'household of God'. There is no doubt that the dominant force within the culture of Asia Minor was androcentric in nature and that the text itself was also a product of this society. But behind the male voices there are shadows of a very large number of women congregants who were actively involved in all levels of leadership within the church of the first century.

## RELEVANCE FOR WOMEN TODAY

It is now evident that past studies and views of history have been more interested in the chief figures of the New Testament rather than in the communities they represented or on whose support they were dependent. It is also

*'... a typically modern assumption that it was the individual geniuses (mostly male) who were the producers of text and the motors of change which has undermined consideration of the circles and groups responsible for the transmission of traditions and production of texts and the several circles of females who figured prominently' (Elliott, 1993:12).*

Women were definitely shapers of the Christian communities in Ephesus and elsewhere since they were shapers of the text. They received, inter-

preted and utilized the text for the purposes of defining the community and their own sense of identity. It is clear that at the time of this letter to Timothy which was written around 59–64 CE there was no hierarchical structure for the church but rather a growing number of first century Jewish and non-Jewish households which were particularly hospitable to Jewish itinerant teachers like Paul and his co-workers. They brought disturbingly revolutionary ideas on behaviour and societal norms and deities. Paul turned the ancient world's value system upside down. People at the bottom end of the social scale – servants and women – were treated in a different way, as equals.

Paul enjoins silence for certain wealthy Gentile patrons in Ephesus, not to exclude them from teaching the gospel of Christ but to convince them of the Christ's salvational qualities, at the core of their beliefs as Christians. It was with great difficulty (if they managed to do so at all) that these women relinquished belief in a feminine fertility deity with the stature of Artemis in exchange for a male god, and gave up propounding and promoting the excellence of Artemis. This is what Paul countered in I Timothy 2:8–3:1a. Perhaps women today can empathize with Ephesian women in their need for female as well as male qualities in a deity. In the twentieth century many women have the same need to find a feminine side of God. It is a thousand pities that 'As long as what is considered sacred is always in the image of men, a whole aspect of what divinity is for women is not accessible to us' (Bolen, 1984).

Faculty of Education, University of Durban-Westville and Promat College

## NOTES

1. I Corinthians 11:3-15; Ephesians 5:21-24.
2. For further information I refer to chapter six of Cairns (1995).
3. There were cults for young girls, pregnant mothers and cults to encourage marital fidelity, as well as cults for prostitutes who worshipped a god of sexual relations.
4. Witherington (1988: 20) cites Dio Cassius for the assertion that the attraction of the traditional cults was fading and the influx of Eastern religions, such as Isis, Serapis, Cybele and Attis *were providing new religious roles for women*.

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## CHARLOTTE MANYE MAXEKE – AGENT FOR CHANGE

*Joan Millard*

### A REMARKABLE WOMAN

Charlotte Manye Maxeke (1871–1939)<sup>1</sup> was a woman whose influence was felt in the lives of the people with whom she came into contact. She helped to make history in the era in which she lived. Maxeke was dedicated to her church, but she was equally dedicated to educating her people and working for their social upliftment. She may be called the ‘Mother of Ethiopia’ because of her involvement in the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa. However, she can also be called a ‘Mother of Africa’ because of her work leading to social transformation for the people among whom she worked. For both of these roles she received international recognition. She was also the founder in 1913 of the Bantu Women’s League, the forerunner of the African National Council’s Women’s League.

Charlotte Maxeke was a person who grasped the opportunities presented to her and made the best of what was offered. In this respect she was unusually fortunate because the opportunities usually afforded an African woman at the end of the 19th century were limited. Practically the only avenue of employment open was domestic service. Maxeke, however, trained as a teacher and then received a university education. She also received recognition for what she and her husband achieved together. Although they worked together on many of the projects she became more widely known for her work than he did.

### HER EARLY YEARS

Charlotte Makhomo Manye was born on 7 April 1871 near Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape (McCord, 1995:195). Her father, Lange Jan Manye, came from a heathen family belonging to the Sotho chiefdom of Ramogopa. Their home was at Blinkwater, near Soekmekaar. Her mother’s

family came originally from the Mpo people who lived in Pondoland. Chased from their homeland by Shaka, the Zulu king, the Mpo moved south to the land of the Xhosa and became part of the Mfengu nation (ibid.:8). Many years before Charlotte was born, her father travelled south to the land of the Xhosa in search of guns for his father. When he reached the Eastern Cape, Lange Jan met Charlotte's mother, who was a school teacher. Lange Jan went to night-school to be educated and worked during the day. In time he became a foreman on the road gangs in Port Elizabeth and a lay preacher in the Presbyterian Church and in due course he married Charlotte's mother (ibid.:10-11).

Charlotte was the eldest of a large family. She and her sister Katie attended school in Uitenhage where her teacher was the Reverend I Wanchope (Skota, 1965:195). Charlotte was a good scholar and was sent to high school at Edward's Memorial School, Port Elizabeth, where her teacher was Mr Paul Xiniwe. Xiniwe was the conductor of her school choir as well as of the church choir. Both Charlotte and her sister Katie became choir members. The church connection of both her teachers had an influence on her life and her family was also very religious.

By the time Charlotte finished school the family had moved to Kimberley. Here she became a teacher and began a career in education that would last a lifetime. Katie was the better singer but both sisters joined the choir of the Presbyterian Church. One night the choir, named the Jubilee Chorus, sang at a party given in honour of a Mr Howell from England. Mr Sinamela, the choir director, and his choir members were invited to tour England. Although Mr Sinamela decided not to go to England, a new director, Mr Balmer, was found.<sup>2</sup> The year was 1891 and Charlotte was twenty years old.

The choir, renamed the 'Kaffir Choir' by Mr Howell, sang to groups of people all over Britain. They even sang to Queen Victoria at her summer palace on the Isle of Wight. While in England the two sisters learnt to speak English fluently, with a British accent. They toured England for two years with the choir before returning to South Africa. Charlotte was promised a visit to America but Katie was glad to be home again. After some years in domestic service she became an interpreter and a dispenser for Dr James McCord, the American Board missionary in Natal. She never

left the mission church but became a valuable member of the missionary team.<sup>3</sup>

## EXPERIENCES IN OTHER COUNTRIES

While she was in Britain Charlotte met a number of people who impressed her and influenced her life. She met Emmeline Pankhurst, the suffragette, who at the time was fighting for women's rights. Someone gave her a book about David Livingstone, the missionary, which told of his love for the African people. She met a woman medical student from West Africa who showed her that a black skin had to be that colour to be protected from the sun if you lived in Africa. For Charlotte, who had been told that blackness was a sign of the 'curse of Ham,' this was a revelation. These people gave her a sense of pride in her Africanness. She also met two African-Americans, the Bogee brothers, who told her about colleges for black people in America, in particular Wilberforce University. Charlotte determined to go the America to further her education.

After her break at home with her family Charlotte was invited to join an American choir, the Orpheus Singers. While in America Bishop Derrick of the African Methodist Episcopal Church helped her to enter Wilberforce University, Ohio, where she obtained a BSc degree, the first African woman from South Africa to do so. She also became acquainted with the teaching of Booker T Washington, the civil rights leader.

There were other students from South Africa at Wilberforce University too. The other South Africans were all men. Women were seldom considered eligible for higher education. Some of the students who later joined the AMEC in South Africa were James Tantsi, Charles Dube, Henry Msikinya, Marshall Maxeke, and Edward Tolityi Magaya. These people formed an educated nucleus for the new church in South Africa (Skota, 1965:159).

During her time in America Charlotte met a number of AMEC women who helped to form her thinking. These women were achievers who made a mark on their community. At the 1884 AMEC Conference in America it was decided to license local women preachers. The men acknowledged that 'female evangelists were becoming very numerous'

(Dodson, 1981:285) so they decided to allow them to become recognized preachers. These preachers included women like Lena Doolin-Mason, whose preaching converted 1 617 'souls,' and other women preachers like Mary Palmer, Emma Johnson and Melinda Cotton. In spite of these concessions women did not have equal status with men in the organization of the church. It must be remembered that at this time it was virtually unknown for a woman to become an evangelist in South Africa. At the turn of the century the Methodist Church in South Africa had a few women 'lay agents' or evangelists like Sarah Jane Ngoro at Mafikeng and Eliza Gqosho in Johannesburg, but this was a rare phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

### THE AMEC COMES TO SOUTH AFRICA

It was Katie who first told Mangena Mokone (1851–1931) about her sister Charlotte's experiences in America. He was her father's cousin,<sup>5</sup> a Methodist minister based in Pretoria in 1892. In October of that year he resolved to leave the Wesleyan Methodist Church because he resented the fact that in the Transvaal separate Synods for black and white ministers were held. He had other complaints too – lack of understanding from the white ministers, no family allowances for African preachers, poor wages and overwork being some of them. He left the Methodists and founded the Ethiopian Church, an inter-tribal truly African church.<sup>6</sup>

Now Katie excitedly read him Charlotte's letters which told of a church controlled by black Americans which was called the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It sounded very like the Methodist Church they knew in South Africa, although the Manye family themselves were Presbyterians. However, the AMEC was free from mission control and all the leaders had been black. The opportunities for education that had been offered to the South African choir members opened the eyes of the people who read her letters to new possibilities for the future. Mokone, the Supervisor of the Ethiopian Church, listened to what Charlotte had to say in her letters. He suggested to the Conference of the Ethiopian Church that they amalgamate with the American church. Charlotte acted as a go-between in the negotiations.

On 31 May 1895 Mokone wrote to Bishop Turner of the AMEC in

America as well as to Charlotte Manye. Charlotte returned his letter and sent Mokone a 'Book of Discipline' (Tantsi, 1968:5). In 1898 Bishop Turner of the AMEC visited South Africa and the amalgamation became a *fait accompli*. Charlotte became one of the pioneers of the AMEC in South Africa. Coan (1961:96) in his study on the AMEC in America and South Africa, remarks on the important role played by Charlotte Manye in helping to unite the AMEC and the Ethiopian Church.

In the early days of the AMEC in South Africa Charlotte Maxeke was afforded special status. She was asked to deliver lectures such as a missionary talk she gave to the annual Conference in 1901.<sup>7</sup> Charlotte was thrilled to be asked to speak and 'congratulated herself on the rare opportunity afforded her ... to speak to her own conference for the first time in her lowly life'.<sup>8</sup> However, she was never ordained and never obtained official status as a leader. In spite of her qualifications she was prepared to acknowledge her 'lowly status' as a woman even though few of the men in the church could match her intellectually.

As a member of the AMEC Charlotte learnt the importance of working out her spirituality through social action. At the 1901 Cape Conference the delegates were told that 'the aim of our church ... is to educate the head, the hand and the heart'.<sup>9</sup> Bishop Coppin of the AMEC in South Africa would later tell the 1903–1905 Native Affairs Commission that their church taught the people theology, but because so many of their members were poor and without their own land, they also taught them how to make a living.

## MARRIAGE AND EDUCATIONAL WORK

In 1903 Manye married the Rev MM Maxeke,<sup>10</sup> a fellow graduate from Wilberforce University. He was one of the South African students that Charlotte had been responsible for recruiting. Campbell writes that 'Charlotte Manye played an instrumental role in extending the 'privileges of Wilberforce' ' (Campbell, 1989:269). Marshall Maxeke and James Tantsi, both teachers, arrived at Wilberforce in 1896 to further their studies. Charlotte and Marshall got to know each other as they shared their common interest in how to help other black South Africans gain the sort of education that they themselves received in America.

Marshall Maxeke was born in 1874 at Middledrift in the Eastern Cape. He received his training at Lovedale Institution but later moved with his family to Johannesburg. Here he became a lay preacher and a teacher. At Wilberforce he received a BA degree and was ordained a minister of the AMEC in 1903, the year he returned to South Africa.

The Maxekes worked together as missionaries for the AMEC. At first they served at Ramogopa, near Pietersburg in the Transvaal. This was a poor and underdeveloped area. Charlotte's father still lived there and he joined the AMEC Church which Marshall started. Charlotte worked as a teacher. Later Enoch Mamba, a headman at Idutywa, invited the Maxekes to establish a school in his 'location'. Mamba had had a dispute with the Cape Administration who were unwilling to provide him with a school for his people. As teachers, the Maxekes became part of the growing presence of the AMEC in the Eastern Cape (Campbell, 1987:26). Marshall Maxeke became a pastor of the AMEC and principal of the Lota High School. Educating the African people continued to be a priority for the Maxekes and in 1908 they founded the Wilberforce Institute for the AMEC at Evaton in the Transvaal. This is now known as the RR Wright Theological Seminary and trains the ministers of the AMEC.

## HER INFLUENCE IN DIFFERENT SPHERES

But education is not the only area for which Charlotte Maxeke is remembered. She left her mark on many areas of South African life. In 1913 Maxeke was a founder and the first President of the Bantu Women's League. This was an initiative to try to improve the lot of African women. In 1918 Maxeke led a deputation of women to Prime Minister Louis Botha to protest against the pass laws. When the first constitution of the African National Council was formulated in 1919, women were excluded from becoming full members. Her husband was a founder member of the ANC from 1912 and the Bantu Women's League worked alongside the men's organization (Walker, 1982:33, 37, 38).

As President of the Bantu Women's League she was asked to speak at many meetings. In 1921 she addressed the 'Women's Reform Club', a group of white suffragettes in Pretoria. She was the first and last African

woman to be singled out by the suffragettes and although she brought to their attention the pitiful conditions of African women in the towns her speech was met with indifference (ibid.:38).

## CHARLOTTE AS SOCIAL REFORMER

In 1925 she read a paper at the General Missionary Conference. Her paper, entitled 'The native Christian mother', showed her concern for African mothers. She drew attention to the difference between the spirituality in action of the early missionaries and the example shown by missionaries of her day. The early missionaries had inspired people to live as Christians because 'they were as pillars' (of their faith).<sup>11</sup> If African church members knocked on the doors of present day missionaries they were told to 'Go round to the kitchen'. She continued: 'People today have no time for anybody who is in trouble'.<sup>12</sup> She drew attention to the difficulties faced by women who left the rural areas to find work in the cities. She told the audience: 'Don't talk religion ... live it. ... We need people who understand the Gospel, who understand how to live it'.<sup>13</sup> An emphasis on the importance of family life was close to her heart and she spoke again at a Student's Christian Association meeting in 1930 on the home as the centre of family life and the woman as the keystone (Roux, 1964:357). She was appointed to act as a Probation Officer, the first African woman to be given such a post. Her work in this post brought her into constant contact with people who had suffered disruption of family life. In 1930 (Karis and Carter, 1972:344)<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Maxeke spoke out against the problems facing urban Africans and said:

*There are many problems pressing in upon us Bantu, to disturb the peaceful working of our homes. One of the chief is perhaps the stream of Native life into the towns. Men leave their homes, and go into the big towns like Johannesburg, where they get a glimpse of a life such as they never dreamed existed. At the end of their term of employment they receive the wages for which they have worked hard, and which should be used for the sustenance of their families, but .... they waste their hard-earned wages, and seem to forget completely the crying need of the family out in the veld. The wife finds that the husband has apparently forgotten her existence, and she therefore makes her hard and weary way to the town in search of him. ...*

*In Johannesburg and other large towns, the male natives are employed to do domestic work, in the majority of instances, and a female domestic is a rarity. ... Bantu wealth is gradually decaying. As a result there are more and more workers making their way to the towns and cities such as Johannesburg to earn a living. And what a living! The majority earn about three pounds ten shillings per month, out of which they must pay twenty-five shillings for rent, and ten shillings for tram fares ... Many of the Bantu feel, and quite rightly too, that the laws of the land are not made for Black and White alike. ...*

Charlotte's work as a probation officer brought her into contact with the people she was describing and she was able to 'render very useful service' to many Africans in need of help.

In 1928 her faithful service to the AMEC brought its own rewards and she was sent to America as a delegate to the General Conference. As part of her 'living-out' of the Gospel, Charlotte remained a loyal member of the AMEC but she also involved herself in social action. Her efforts to get others to join the AMEC were fuelled by the hope that they would benefit in the same way as she had from their association with that church. Charlotte Maxeke's spiritual experience as a Christian guided her in her work for social transformation. What she did for the African people of her time must be remembered with gratitude and admiration.

In 1935 the National Council of African Women superseded the Bantu Women's League. Charlotte Maxeke was the first President but the job of running the organization was given to Ms Mina Soga. The same year, Charlotte was invited to address the All Africa Conference in Bloemfontein.

The statements she made to conferences and government commissions leave us with a number of unanswered questions. What changed the generally accepted perception of missionaries in South Africa as 'selfless pillars of the faith' to 'racist church organizers'? Was this a fair judgement? The problems of migrant labour and poor wages for domestic work that Charlotte struggled against, remain with us. How long will these remain problems for South African society? Charlotte Maxeke died in 1939 but the work she pioneered opened the way for other women to become aware of their potential to achieve too.

Department of Church History, Unisa

## NOTES

1. Skota (1933:77) states that Maxeke was born on 7 April 1874. She was older than her sister Katie Manye Makanya who was born on 28 July 1873 (McCord, 1995:10) so although Skota was personally acquainted with Charlotte Maxeke he did not record the date of her birth correctly.
2. Skota (1965:195) refers to the director as Mr Bam.
3. Review of McCord (1995) in *The Star*, Johannesburg, 21 August 1995:12.
4. Supplementary Resolutions of the *Minutes of the Transvaal and Swaziland District Synod* held at Johannesburg in January 1899 – 'List of agents'.
5. Coppin (1903:26); this bishop of the AMEC calls the Manye sisters Mokone's nieces.
6. The name 'Ethiopian' was chosen for a number of reasons – Psalm 68:31 reads 'Ethiopia (Cush) shall stretch out her hands to God'. Ethiopia was one of the earliest parts of Africa to be Christianized (Acts 8).
7. *Minutes of the Cape Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* held at Cape Town, December 1901.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid
10. The Rev Marshall Maxeke was born in 1874 in Middledrift, Cape. He attended Lovedale Training College. The family later moved to Johannesburg where Maxeke became friendly with ZJ Tantsi. Maxeke and Tantsi accompanied Bishop Turner of the AME when he returned to America after his visit to South Africa. Maxeke and Tantsi studied at Wilberforce University where Maxeke won the Rush Prize and gained his BA degree with honours in classics and mathematics. He also passed his theological examination and was ordained an elder in the AMEC. He compiled the first Xhosa AMEC hymn-book (Skota, 1933).
11. *Report of the General Missionary Conference* 1925:129.
12. Ibid.:130.
13. Ibid.:133.
14. Document 51c, 'Social conditions among women and girls' is an address by Charlotte Maxeke to the Conference of European and Bantu Christian Student Associations at Fort Hare, 27 June to 3 July 1930. (Published in *Christian students and modern South Africa*).

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## WOMEN USING CULTURE AGAINST WOMEN

*Christina Landman*

### THE HIGH PRICE OF CULTURE

'Have you become more like a child today?' Maretha Maartens, a local Afrikaans lay author on middle-aged religiosity, piously and continuously asks her white female readers in her series of best selling books.<sup>1</sup> On those women who answer the question in the negative, and who are thus not conforming to the woman-child ideal of Maartens, she inflicts severe religious guilt. Such women, she tells people with an already high incidence of depression, cause their own misery as well as that of society by disturbing the ordained relationships between woman, man and God.

During the past five years alone, white women in South Africa have bought approximately two million books on piety written by local Afrikaans women and men.<sup>2</sup> For the concerned researcher this means that more than one book per white woman has been sold, and that every white woman in South Africa potentially owns one. These books emphasize that God favours female helplessness and especially favours a female consciousness of guilt at the dishonouring of biblically defined stereotypes.

A 'secular' bookstore like the CNA is dependent for a third of its income from religious books of this nature and it maintained these high sales figures even during a time when groups of Christians boycotted the store for selling pornography.<sup>3</sup> One has, therefore, to ask the question why hundreds of thousands of women buy books in which the blame for the misery in their lives is attributed to their personal sins and their inability to conform to childlike and dependent behaviour. Why do harassed, bored and depressed women buy these books? Why does this piety sell so well? The answer is simply this: women are thus empowered, with the sanction of religion, to try to control the people in their private worlds with traditional female behaviour. Women who have not been socialized to exercise overt power are led to believe, to put it in a vulgar way, that God will guide them in getting what they want (or rather what they need<sup>4</sup>) by pleasing their men.

These strategies based on the manipulation of stereotyped cultural behaviour, are of course more true of an older generation white women in South Africa than the present one. But the younger generation still suffers because of it. An older generation of white women bought pink books on religion and raised daughters who today cannot be found in Parliament, are not prominent in managerial positions and lack skills in public facilitation. Because they have been taught, through the privatization of their piety, to please individuals, even this younger generation is in general unable to facilitate group decision making except in areas of homemaking.

The relevance of this heritage for our theme is this: although the younger generation has more space in which to come out of the closet, they have inherited another characteristic from their foremothers which effectively keeps them from having a public voice. They do not allow each other to move out of the private sphere of female behaviour. A strong feature of female interrelations, legitimized by religion, is the practice of keeping other women culture-bound.

## THE GOOD WOMAN OF BIBLICAL TIMES

Examples from the textual history of (*inter alia*) Christianity can both substantiate and explain this phenomenon. An early example is the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. In this Book, Wisdom is portrayed as a woman, and yet there is no other book in the Bible in which women use culture against other women more explicitly and disempoweringly than in this Book. In the last chapter of this compilation of wisdoms (chapter 31), the mother of King Lemuel warns her son against politically active and sexually empowered women. This mother (if it was indeed a woman who wrote these instructions) shared men's fear of women's (albeit covert) political power and their using their sexuality to obtain it. Marrying a foreign woman may bring a group of women into your court who will form a coalition against you, undermining your power and eventually overthrowing you in favour of another king, she warns her son. In the second part of this chapter then the activities of a woman of worth are described. The description includes household and economic activities which a woman from the upper middle class performed during these times with the help of her highly trained servants, and it excludes activities related to public

politics and sexuality. A man will do well to possess Woman Wisdom, is the message of the Book of Proverbs; so also a man who owns the woman described in Proverbs 31, will lack for nothing – a woman, that is, who is hardworking but highly stylized in terms of public life and sexuality (Fontaine, 1992:151).

## SUPPRESSED VOICES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Suspicion of women's potential power in the fields of politics and sexuality also influenced the early Church Fathers' decisions on whose writings were to be included in the Biblical canon. Many women won the favour of the Church Fathers by denouncing their sexuality through asceticism and virginity, yet for political reasons their works were excluded from the Christian Testament. Some of the voices of these – exclusively upper class – women are available to us in apocryphal form.

One of these women from an upper class society in Asia Minor, whose story moved too far into the public empowerment of women and was suppressed by the Fathers, was Thecla, a disciple of Paul (Clark, 1983:78ff; McGinn, 1994:800ff). The Acts of Paul and Thecla, written in the second century, tells the story of Thecla who was converted by Paul in the Asian city of Iconium. She decided to disregard the expectation of her culture that she get married, much to the dismay of her fiancé who had her condemned to be burnt alive in public. On the appointed day virgins, that is young eligible women, brought wood and hay in order to burn Thecla for her anti-cultural behaviour. However, God had chosen to demonstrate in Thecla a new female culture, that of Christian virginity, and sent a hailstorm to quench the flames. Paul then left for Antioch with Thecla as his newly acknowledged disciple. In Antioch the rejection scene between Thecla and another man who took a fancy in her was repeated; this man likewise had her condemned for culture-unfriendly behaviour. This time Thecla was condemned to fight the wild beasts in the arena.

Now follows one of the most amazing descriptions, if not the only one, extant in early Christian literature, of female mass behaviour (Jensen, 1990:86–92). The women in the arena reacted to every move of Thecla, who was brought into the arena naked, obviously to ridicule her new reli-

gious commitment to virginity. According to custom the women spectators sat together in a group, but at the beginning of the show they were divided in their sentiments. Some of them revelled in Thecla's condemnation and shouted: 'Bring that woman who committed sacrilege!' Others sided with Thecla and her right to free choice, shouting, 'Away with the city for this lawless deed!'

A lioness was sent in against Thecla. The lioness lay down at Thecla's feet. The crowd of women cheered. A fierce male lion was sent in. The lioness fought him and both died. The women wept for the lioness. Thecla then baptized herself in a pond of killer seals. The women flung petals into the arena and the air was filled with a multitude of perfumes. When Thecla was released by the governor after a host of miraculous events, and was told to put on her clothes, the women cried out loud, now no longer in two voices but 'as with one mouth' in support of Thecla. Thecla's story is told in the second century AD as the story of women taking a communal stand on culture, albeit in conversion to a specific faith.

Thus the cult of Thecla was established in Asia Minor and it spread rapidly, much to the concern of the Fathers. In response, it is said, they created the cult of a very individualistic mother Mary, a woman on her own, a model of woman without sexual or political power or friends, to suppress the cult of Thecla and the power Thecla exercised over women. The Acts of (Paul and) Thecla therefore are not to be found in the Bible the Fathers gave us, although Thecla complied with their criterion for inclusion, which was discipleship of Jesus or Paul. Instead, we find in the Bible a well represented backlash mentality against the power of strong individual women and women's groups. That these may have occurred even earlier than the Thecla entourage is suggested by (inter alia) the much earlier text of Timothy (1 Tim 2:12) who warned women thus: 'I do not allow a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence...'.<sup>5</sup>

## **WOMEN, POLITICS AND SEXUALITY DURING THE MIDDLE AGES**

During the Middle Ages two themes persisted within the overall theme of women, politics and sexuality. The first was the exemplary worth of the asexuality of religious females. The second was a common agreement that

women's religious salvation should not have any social or political consequences (Borresen, 1993:14).

However, this paper does not deal primarily with the problem of strong and achieving women who threaten men and with the cultural prohibitions installed by male hierarchies to keep such women out of the public arena, although it has been an established phenomenon since at least biblical times. The main thesis of this paper is that strong and achieving women do not always empower other women but may threaten them, and that other women may react by invoking cultural prohibitions against them. This theme, due not so much to a scarcity but to the type of sources available, is difficult to trace through medieval times.

One may read the *Regulae* written by Claire of Assisi (d 1235) and the one written later by Brigitta of Sweden (d 1375) either for their democratic and optimistic views on communal womanhood (Borresen, 1993:65, 72) or for their acknowledgement of a gender hierarchy in the Creation and their acquiescence, albeit unconscious, in the suppression of women under male authority. The fact is that the individualized voices of women from the Middle Ages, who spoke either on their own behalf or on behalf of some few other exceptional women, were voices from the upper class, voices of women who had rare access to literacy and were hardly threatened by other women in a competing society. This absence in the literature of women evaluating other women, whether negatively or not, is significant for our theme because it points to the ultimate individualization, desexualization and depoliticization of (literate) women. It indicates in short their total conformation to a religious culture in which women's use of political and sexual powers was seen as anti-religious and only the lone voice of a woman talking to her God was permitted.

## **THE REFORMATION AND THE REDISCOVERY OF PERSONAL GUILT**

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was an effort to return Christianity to the values of the earliest Christians as (partly) described in the Bible. These early views on women, attributed in the Bible to Paul and Timothy, were honoured by the Reformers whose cultural ideas on women after 16 centuries still corresponded to those of

their forefathers. Consequently, until recently, Protestantism did not develop a class of women schooled in theology or at least informed about the socio-political consequences of religion. As far as women's skills in theologizing are concerned, Protestantism therefore was a step backwards from the learned women in the medieval nunneries.

Apart from rediscovering 'primitive' Christianity, the Reformation also brought about another shift in religious discourse by rediscovering personal guilt. The early Christians served God through martyrdom; when Christianity became the accepted religion, Christians suffered for God through asceticism; when asceticism was made unpopular by the Reformers as 'good works', personal guilt was rediscovered as a means of winning God's favour. This theological discovery was popularized during the seventeenth century as pietism. Although the authors of pietism were almost exclusively male, women were very much attracted to their guidelines for internalizing guilt.

### **WHITE FEMALE PIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The piety of personal guilt strongly influenced South African women in the following way. The Dutch pietists, the 'oude schrijvers' of the seventeenth century, lost their European audience during the eighteenth century and their surplus books were sent to the colonies. In South Africa, Hester Venter (b 1750) claimed conversion to pietism simply on reading the title of a book by one of these Dutch pietists, namely *Het gekrookte riet* – 'The broken reed' – by Smijtegelt (Venter, 1852:6). It was these books of the 'oude schrijvers', of Smijtegelt and a'Brackel, the only reading matter she possessed apart from the Bible and the *Kerkbode*, which Susanna Smit (1799–1865) packed in her wakis to accompany her on the trek northwards. For decades those few white local women who could read were exposed to the idea that God was very hard to please and very quick to recognize sinners. It influenced these women's view of other people, also (presumably) their view of other women. They 'excelled in self-humiliation and in self-hate to please their demanding male God. This poor self-image ... developed amongst these women into a negative view of all people' (Landman, 1994:118).

However, since local pietism regarded defamatory remarks about other

people (except blacks, moral transgressors, and other children of Satan) as ungodlike, the women suppressed their anger against other women. Hester Venter (ibid.:1) described her anger towards her sisters who not only overshadowed her socially, but also took a major share of their mother's inheritance, leaving her with very little, arguing that she was the youngest. However, she immediately pointed to her own guilt in experiencing this anger; she envisaged herself on the roadway to hell and almost lost all hope for her salvation. Women were angry at women using culture against them, but piety kept them from expressing anger; on the contrary, piety forced them to blame women's cultural victimization on themselves.

Was this internalization of guilt, this pessimistic view of humankind and the passive acceptance of other women's exploitation, transferred from white female piety to black women converts on the mission stations and in the girls' schools? Benigna van Groenekloof of Mamre, 'een verhaal voor de Christen Kleurlinge van Zuid-Afrika door een hunner leeraars' is one of the earliest texts on local black women's religious experience in South Africa. It tells the story of the fears of the women converts in a Moravian settlement at Mamre in the second half of the eighteenth century. Without naming their sins, these women shared the fears of losing their souls to damnation and expressed their conviction that no human endeavour could save them except a belief in the redeeming power of Jesus Christ. Like the white women, the black women were left 'helpless but guilty' (Schilder, 1987) by their religion. But did their religion also leave them isolated and exploitative of other women? In the text of Benigna there is a communality evident amongst the black women which not even the white male author of their stories could suppress, a communality which later became more evident in the mothers' unions (and the manyanos) formed amongst black religious women (Labode, 1992).

The textual history of religious women in South Africa points towards an individualized God-talk for white women and a societal spirituality for black women. However, a difference in class may actually account for this difference which seems to originate in racial backgrounds. The white women were from a literate middle class while the black women were workers who organized themselves into religious communes for survival purposes. White women were in competition for male favour and would use types of covert power, like culturally disempowering one another, in

order to gain power in this 'survival of the fittest individual' game, while black women workers could hardly afford this luxury.

## A (POST-)MODERN QUESTION

Making a general deduction from already over-generalized assumptions, leads us to believe that the phenomenon of women using culture against other women is a very old one, since we discovered it in the Bible, but that the question of why and how women engage in such a practice is a modern one, since the women's voices available throughout history were those of individualized upper class women who were in dialogue with God about their souls and not with other women. One can actually assume that it is a post-modern issue since 'solidarity' feminism does not address it and blames only men for the cultural harrassment of women.

It furthermore seems that this is a phenomenon to be addressed mainly amongst white women since black women display much more of a communal attitude. And yet it is women from the Third World, representing a broader spectrum of female voices from different classes in society, who put the question of women using culture against other women on the table. In 1995 Kenyan theologian Musimbi Kanyoro published an article entitled 'Cultural hermeneutics: an African contribution' in a World Council of Churches publication (Ortega, 1995:18-28) in which she made the following statement:

*Another point that needs to be confronted is that the practice of institutionalized cultural violence has ensured that women are not only victims but also, more often than not, perpetrators. Who enforce inhuman rituals on widows in Africa and Asia? Who are the excisors of the female? Who are the instigators of divorce or polygamy in the case of wives unable to give birth to children or specifically to male children? These are areas of women's violence against women. We have to break the vicious circle of women violating other women in the name of culture. We cannot continue to bemoan the socialization we have had when lives are at stake... Women must come of age, confront ourselves and also address women as the cause of oppression. This is not a refusal to address male oppression, but rather a way of empowering women to remove the log in our own eyes so that we can see clearly the log in other people's eyes.*

What does this phenomenon look like in the broader setting of recent times? and can feminism deal with it? I shall refer to two instances of this phenomenon, one 'public' and the other 'private' (granted that the distinction between public and private is a patriarchal one). In a public setting (like Unisa) where a comfortable career and life are linked to hierarchical adaptation, women are tempted to have themselves empowered against other women to gain ruling class popularity. Regularly it is liberated women, even feminists, who empower themselves at the cost of other women, by claiming that human rights are contextually determined, that women should blend into the culture (the ethos) of their working environment even if that ethos places women in opposition to other women. 'Cultural' (hierarchical) solidarity, they claim, is more important than female solidarity.

The same argument, that it is more important to be an Afrikaner or a black or a colleague than to address women's liberation corporatively, also disempowers women in the private sphere. When Purity Malinga<sup>6</sup> at a research meeting of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at Unisa pointed to lobola as one of the reasons for violence against black women since it reduces women to the property of men, she was accused by the black men in the audience quoting women for using feminism 'to divide black into male and female'. As Kanyoro has pointed out with reference to African cultures and myself pointing to Afrikaner societies, it is women, happily and ignorantly fenced in by female subcultures, who perpetuate cultural habits and female stereotypes to acquire acceptability in the male dominant culture.

What can feminism do to liberate women from this subcultural behaviour? Feminism with its ideals for sisterhood is, of course, embarrassed by this phenomenon. Refusing to acknowledge this as a problem, some feminisms emphasize that differences exist between women and allow for women's freedom to be culture-bound (Ackermann, 1996:136-148). However, Kanyoro is one and probably the first theologian who acknowledges that this problem will not go away and that feminists need to strategize against it. Kanyoro then works consciously on a strategy of cultural criticism, or what she calls 'cultural hermeneutics', which means rereading the Bible with a critical eye towards the role culture played in determining women's behaviour. To recycle these old stories may seem futile to secular feminists. However, the Bible is the only text shared by women in Africa who come from diverse cultures; it is, furthermore, one of the few texts of religious

history in which the phenomenon of women using culture against women is described; lastly, black women see many similarities between their own cultural constraints and the constraints prescribed for women of biblical times. This is also the reason why this paper took its starting point from the Bible. Rereading the Bible then as a source book for evidence of cultural manipulation is an important liberating task for religion feminists.

Other religious feminists, like Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995), go beyond the Bible to retrieve an aboriginal religiosity which testifies, it is claimed, to a sisterhood which existed in African cultures before the coming of Christianity. Christianity is not hereby rejected but encouraged to adapt its teachings in the light of this newly discovered (pre)history from the time when cultures were women-friendly.

Religious women in Africa have therefore contributed this to the 'female culture' debate: rereading contexts and retelling stories will give a voice to women of all classes of society and contribute to female development and support systems. These two possibilities, rereading common (con)texts (like the Bible) and retelling history within the genres of both cultural criticism and cultural reconstruction, were also discussed at the last meeting of the Circle of African Women Theologians<sup>7</sup> as the two means of fostering female solidarity.

## CONCLUSION: MAKING THE CONNECTION

Present generations of white Afrikaans women have been the victims of the volksmoeders, women who in previous generations controlled the morals and the politics of the nation from behind the scenes while keeping other women bound to a female culture of non-participation in politics and decisionmaking. This tradition of the volksmoeders is at present perpetuated by women like Maretha Maartens who use naive pietism to manipulate women's spirituality towards unhealthy forms of covert control of God, men and other women. Black women again have to deal with their own type of volksmoeders, as Kanyoro has pointed out, who exercise physical control over other women through cultural practices. English-speaking South African women may well still have Queen Victoria as their prototypical *volksmoeder*.

What do volksmoeders look like in the academic world? Who are the academic women who exercise control over other women by using patriarchally based practices of power behaviour? These volksmoeders fall into two groups, both of which can be called 'upper middle class' since they comprise graduate women. The first group consists of professors who have succeeded within the hierarchical system and have conformed to its culture. They are an exclusivist group who do not have any real commitment to other women and who are therefore usually chosen by existing liberal authorities to represent women. The second group are 're-entry women' who confront women younger than they but who occupy positions higher than theirs, with a culture of reference towards older women. Competing in patriarchal hierarchies thus keeps women from bonding when in fact it should be an occasion for their consolidating.

Retelling their stories, renaming their experience, and reclaiming a common tradition are practices recommended by Africa's women theologians for effecting solidarity amongst women. 'Rebonding' should be added as a fourth category. Rebonding presupposes a culture of mutuality amongst women; mutuality is the basis for equal, life-giving and transformative relations amongst women. Mutuality 'is a relational process in which all persons, or parties, are empowered, thereby experiencing themselves as able to survive, affect others creatively, and make a constructive difference in the world around them' (Heyward, :155-156). In mutual relationships culture is not used as a means of control; on the contrary, a culture of sharing power to the benefit of all develops.

Previously it was not regarded as politically correct to explore the phenomenon of women using culture against women because of the support it seemed to give to the sexist and antifeminist argument that 'women anyway cannot stand each other' and that 'it is against the female character to work with one another'. However, when the investigation into women taking opposing sides on culture emanates from women themselves, and an answer is sought in processing mutuality as a possible remedy, it becomes an important exercise in self-criticism and self-knowledge – and in reconstructing female solidarity.

Research Institute for Theology and Religion, Unisa

**NOTES**

1. For example, *En daar het stilte gekom*: 44. Also translated into English.
2. Numbers released by CNA.
3. In 1995, when pornography became accepted in a pre-legalized form, the CNA still earned 27% of its income from these books.
4. Frugality in asking is recommended. 'Hy het gesorg. Ek het gevra, maar nie vër verby die eiergeld nie. Jy moes bietjie vra, dan kom hy dit nie agter nie' (Groenewald, 1995:30).
5. See for a more detailed discussion of this text the chapter by Cairns.
6. Malinga is a lecturer at the Theological Education by Extension College in Johannesburg.
7. Held in August 1996 in Nairobi, Kenya.

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## INTRODUCTION TO FEMINIST FICTION AND FEMINE FICTIONS

J. Hillis Miller

# FEMINIST FICTION AND FEMINE FICTIONS

The essays here are a selection of those that have appeared in *Diacritics*. The way by which *Diacritics* grew, particularly in rich and diverse ways, is the product of a long and often contentious conversation. Some of the people who have been part of that conversation are: Cheryl, who has put a lot of time and work together in making the *Diacritics* "bookend" series, which are edited by us, and who has been particularly helpful in the early stages of the conversation; and also those who have been particularly helpful in the later stages of the conversation, including the physical production of this journal and the many other people who have been particularly helpful in the production of this journal. The *Diacritics* series is a lot of people's work, and the success of women being happily formed has been

## INTRODUCTION TO 'FEMINIST FICTION AND FEMININE FICTIONS'

*J Malherbe*

The writers in this part all look at the intersection of fiction and gender issues. If we take fiction in the sense of creative and imaginative interpretations of reality, then there are at least two kinds of fiction of interest to the gender-sensitive reader. Firstly, there is critical feminist fiction in which oppressive stereotypes of women are exposed, and disempowering patriarchal mechanisms are displayed, and challenged by alternative visions of strong women who resist and reject the gender codes by which society seeks to socialize them into the 'proper' role for women. Examples of this kind of writing are to be found in the novels of Maria de Zayas, Mda and Vapi. Then secondly, there are the feminine fictions, imaginative and often alluring creations of women in the medium of language or visual images. They are fictions because they are not an attempt at realistic portrayal of any actual woman, but are rather an ideal presented for readers and viewers to aspire to and to construct their own identity in terms of, e.g., the 'good little girls' of the book *Little women*.. Such images are primarily figments of the masculine imagination (whether created by male or female writers). They succeed to a great extent in conditioning the mindset of both men and women, and are thus a powerful means of maintaining the existing power relations between men and women in society.

The essays here are all studies of one of these two kinds of fiction. The essay by Yolanda Gamboa gives the reader a rich and detailed picture of the gendering codes at work in seventeenth century Spain, a society as harsh as any have been in subordinating women. Church, state and cultural norms worked together to maintain the masculine 'code of honour' which prescribed strict limits on women's behaviour. The ideal of womanly excellence, the 'normative woman', was defined in relation to the masculine honour principle, and as a result, the boundaries of what was acceptable in a woman were severely confining. The physical expression of this psychological and emotional confinement was women's being contained in the private space of the home. De Zayas' work is full of images of containment and limitation; of women being savagely forced into a tiny

space, their freedom being taken away, their mouths being shut to imprison their voice. These are images that speak to us and move us today, and make us aware of the prevalent codes of 'manly honour', of 'proper womanly behaviour', and of that powerful tool of women's disempowerment: confinement to the home, to one's inner being, and banishment from open, public places where one can speak and be heard.

The ideal of normative womanhood is central to Thabazi Ntshinga's paper on the Xhosa women writers Mda and Vapi. She takes a close look at what traditional Xhosa society prescribes as proper behaviour for a woman in certain circumstances, and for a man, and for the correct relations between them. She shows how it is women who play the primary role in transmitting traditional attitudes and values to the children of a community. The fact that it is women who choose to maintain and pass on the customary views, supports Ntshinga's claim that there is nothing intrinsically bad for women in the traditional feminine roles. As illustrated in the two novels she analyses, it is rather the abuse of tradition and its misinterpretation by people with selfish motives, that results in the oppression of women. Nevertheless, the suffering that women go through as a result of the distortion of tradition is strongly presented by Mda and Vapi, whose women 'articulate their felt realities as against what is prescribed to them by the male-dominated tradition'. Here we find not so much explicit critical comment on gender relations, as a statement of the anguish women may suffer simply as a result of being women.

The second two papers in this section deal with feminine fictions: constructions of women's identity designed to manipulate the reader or viewer in a way that will serve not their own, but other people's interests. In modern urban life, we are constantly exposed to advertising, to pictures and text that try to convince the readers of some idea, or make them want to buy something. Amanda du Preez' frame of reference is the field of current advertising, specifically the four ads for the 'Sissy Boy' brand of jeans. She takes the 'femme fatale' stereotype as the basis for an analysis of this set of ads. The femme fatale is that dangerous and devastatingly sexually attractive temptress of men who seems to have complete power over them. This is of course a product of the male imagination, and not any real woman, but it nevertheless manages to get complicity from many women who want to be femme fatales, perhaps because of the promise

of power it holds out. This makes it possible for skilful manipulators of the media to sell jeans by peddling the femme fatale image while at the same time seeming to offer women freedom from typically 'feminine' constraints. This essay is an exposé of the complex motives and values that underly a particular set of adverts. The lesson we learn is to look more closely and critically at adverts in general, to ask ourselves if we are being manipulated, not for our own good, by them, and especially, how advertising contributes to the powerlessness and subservience of women in a patriarchal consumer society.

Feminine images of another sort, the 'good little girl', are the subject of the final piece in the group. This picture of how females should be is, no less than the femme fatale, a product of men's fancies, supported by those women who would please men at all costs. Even more than the femme fatale, this is a disempowering piece of patriarchal manipulation, designed to ensure that women will read their role in life as to serve men and have no 'selfish' purposes of their own. By way of illustration, Myrna Mchet talks about three children's classics: *Little women*, *A little princess*, and *Beauty and the beast*. She shows first how the stories feed a specific syndrome in our society, the 'good girl' syndrome. The good girl is a cultural archetype with core values of nurturing and self-sacrifice. If a woman is to find happiness, she must put aside her own desires, interests and ambitions in order to nurture her husband, father, brothers and ultimately her children. 'A woman's highest reward is to be loved and to spend her life in the service of others'. Having shown the presence of this syndrome in the books, Mchet looks at the film versions to see if any progress towards dismantling the 'good girl' image has been made in the more advanced technology of a presumably more advanced society. Unfortunately, no real progress has been made, in spite of some cosmetic changes in the filmed stories to satisfy the gender lobby.

We tend to accept the normative idea of what is proper for women, because that is the existing norm and it is what we have been socialized to recognize as what women are. People look at adverts like the *Sissy Boy* jeans ads, and read books like the three children's classics, usually without realizing the gendering that is taking place in the process, and without being critically aware of the manipulative moves being made on their attitudes and values. They have been conditioned to accept the present patri-

archal status quo in all its manifestations. This is the value of gender studies - that it raises our critical consciousness of oppressive gender manipulation and gives us with the means and the motivation to challenge that conditioning. No one who reads the essay *The good girl syndrome* for instance will be able to read the children's classics to young people in future without trying to show them the manipulative conditioning (of both girls and boys) that is taking place, and to encourage them to resist the oppressive gender coding the stories contain.

Fiction is an especially potent medium both for gender coding of the negative, patriarchal kind, and for the feminist critique of oppressive attitudes, expectations and images. It is potent because in fiction we meet our dreams and unformulated desires; novels show us what we could be rather than what we are. They give us ideals to aspire to; advertisements for instance show us dazzlingly beautiful images of how we might look, in a matrix loaded with desirability. We are not inclined to be critical of fictions. After all, they are not a truth claim and they do not make a statement of fact which could invite challenge; they are hypotheticals which whisper 'Imagine a world in which things were like this' or 'Would you not like to be like her?' If we are to guard against being the unconscious victims of such persuasion, we must maintain a gender-critical awareness, and this is done in the reading of essays like the four here.

Dept of Philosophy and Institute for Gender Studies