

Orwell and Women's Issues – a Shadow over the Champion of Decency

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For reasons, which, in a sense, can be traced back to his childhood through autobiographical works like “Such, Such Were the Joys”, but which ultimately remain obscure, George Orwell developed into a man much at odds with the world at large. Discontent launched him on the path of “democratic socialism” and he became a spokesman for the underdog and those living under political oppression. The abuse of capitalism oriented him towards working men and the fear of totalitarianism made him speak out for intellectual liberty and this fight ensured him the way to the pedestal. However, he did not realise that beside political tyranny there are much more subtle and pervasive ways of manipulating our consciousness, the rigid delimitation of gender roles being such a social construct. His ambivalent attitude towards women and feminism, his homophobia, glorification of war and an eagerness to take part in it as a requirement of a man's man, his public-minded oeuvre and his intense patriotism evoked by the Second World War all fall into the pattern of a traditional concept of masculinity, not tolerating behaviour trespassing on its well-established borderlines. A close reading of some relevant pieces of his otherwise huge corpus of journalism will show that in spite of some attempts to acquit him of feminist charges and provide evidence of an evolution of his attitude, his essentially male-centred and patriarchal outlook remained unchanged, displaying a grasp of human relations along gender lines that leaves much to be desired.

The Icon of Masculine Behaviour

Orwell's attitude to women and feminism is intertwined with his emphatic virility. His prejudice against women and his stance against feminism on the one hand, and his homophobia, mixed with hints of repressed homoeroticism and a repulsion from effeminate and soft men on the other hand may as well be the two sides of the same coin, an “unmitigated masculinity” in Woolfian terms. A strong will, courage, heroism, commitment, self-sacrifice and self-restraint are all virtues associated with masculinity of which Orwell set an outstandingly good example. They ensured him a safe niche in society and literary reputation and they in his lifetime gave him reassurance that he was not a failure, a sense of

which had stalked him from childhood. Through action, being the opposite of feminine passivity, he projected a virile image of himself in service of the common good and common man with much moral sermonising supporting his quest. The snivelling boy of “Such, Such Were the Joys” who had neither guts nor character and who was doomed to be a failure became a writer much obsessed with manliness and toughness, who made a habit of lashing out at fellow intellectuals reluctant to act and who went out of his way to prove to himself that he had the guts. He had the guts to descend among the outcasts, he had the guts to fight and get wounded in Spain, he always had the guts to disclose brutal truths regardless of the side on which he stood, and in Cunningham’s words “the criticism of Orwell, veteran of the notoriously ferocious Eton College wall game, had nothing if not the guts” (66). In his eyes, Auden was “a sort of gutless Kipling” (*CW* 5, 170) and the intelligentsia did not really understand that “to survive you often have to fight and to fight you often have to dirty yourself” (*CEJL* 2, 250) and that however demanding it may be, “life has got to be lived largely in terms of effort” (*CW* 5, 183-184). Thus, it is no wonder that insulted, not surprisingly often pacifist, intellectuals came to regard Orwell as “the preacher of Physical Courage as an Asset to the left-wing intellectual” (*CEJL* 2, 225).

He spoke to a male audience and his world was not one in which women could be ascribed a stance equal to that of men. Virginia Woolf’s judgement on Kipling’s writings seems to be applicable to Orwell: “they celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men” (92). This is especially true with respect to his non-fiction, where he wrote about male (primarily male because public) concerns for male readers. In his favourite phrase, “common man”, man was not a substitute for people but really excluded the common woman. In his vocabulary masculine and feminine bore value judgements, associating the former with strength, courage and action and the latter with passivity and softness. The ideal colloquial language of the ordinary man for which a writer according to him had to strive was not only clear, visual and concrete, but, quite importantly, though somewhat less directly alluded to, vigorous and masculine. His writing unquestionably implies that in his outlook the human norm was masculine, using the word ‘feminine’ mostly with a pejorative connotation.

The posthumous cult of Orwell as an ideal of proper masculine behaviour emerged primarily on the basis of obituaries and studies by male friends and critics. In compliance with Orwell’s emphatic masculinity, as John Rodden observes, the Orwell cult is in part a cult of masculinity. It is worth quoting him at some length:

The masculine voice of Orwell’s prose, his association of moral courage with physical courage, his own ‘manly’ example that socialism is something to fight and die for, his railing against the ‘softness’ of a machine civilisation, his emphasis on ‘hard’ experience

rather than theory and jargon, his conviction that one could be a socialist and yet be an 'ordinary' man, his Quixotic capacity to *act*: Orwell the man and writer projected a virile image, especially attractive to radical male intellectuals of a generation naively worshipful of 'common' men of action. Indeed part of his appeal has always been his capacity to make intellectual life seem manly, not effeminate, a calling of unusual adventure, larger than life. Male intellectuals have therefore projected their own dreams onto him, romanticizing his life as the saga of a world-historical individual somehow managing to touch all the major currents of his age, from poverty to imperialism to fascism. In all this Orwell has seemed the quintessential public writer – and the public sphere is the one to which men have traditionally felt called and compelled (225. Italics in the original).

Orwell's markedly masculine stance has been rewarded by male readers. As Rodden notes, the critics, who played the largest role in his reputation building and, more importantly, for whom Orwell stood as an intellectual model, have been men. For them Orwell was not just a "political or generational exemplar", a figure whose ethos guided them in all urgent public issues of their day, but an "inspirational gender model" to which they might as well have been blind: "male critics have been peculiarly silent as to the significance of Orwell's reputation among male intellectuals and his special masculine appeal" (Rodden 212). Their silence might have been due to their being unaware of this factor in Orwell's appeal, just as Orwell was probably unconscious of his own emphatic masculinity. The recognition of masculinity on the part of some critics was not coupled with a critical stance either.

Quite to the contrary, Paul Potts, for instance, in his "Quixote on a Bicycle" assures his one-time friend of unconditional praise for everything he was, including his unquestionable masculinity. "He was very masculine; not necessarily a bad thing in a man, but in the sense that he was every inch a man, and not in the sense that he was a penny-halfpenny trying to be tuppence" (Potts 250). However, the exaltation of masculinity gains an unpleasant taste when it becomes the ideal in opposition to femininity, as when Potts goes on to applaud Orwell's kindness: "He was kind looking but it was a masculine kindness – most kindness isn't" (Potts 250). Christopher Hitchens, intent on saving Orwell from feminist claws, argues that if "viewed with discrimination", Orwell's prejudice turns out to be against "the sexless woman, or the woman who has lost her sex and become shrivelled and/or mannish" (150). Without supporting his view from Orwell's text, he comments on the phenomenon as being an "old male trope" and adds that it conforms to Orwell's wider dislike of anything 'unnatural'. The quotation marks of the latter word reflects an awareness of the distinction between biological and acquired social attributes but one wonders whether his suspicion of Orwell's being a captive of the 'old male trope' is not a revelation

of his own preferences. Self-revealing passages are to be found not only in Orwell's critical statements but also in the commentary of Orwell's observers. According to Rodden, "[j]ust as some of Orwell's critical statements on Dickens, Swift, Tolstoy, and Kipling tell us more about him than about them, observers' comments on Orwell not infrequently amount less to literary criticism than to self- and group-analysis" (9). Instead of sex – Orwell showed an interest in both boyish as well as womanly women – it would have been cleverer of Hitchens to argue in terms of gender: Orwell's prejudice was more probably rooted in a fear of the mix of social roles, as his hatred of feminists attests. His denouncement of women taking up traditionally masculine roles like, as we will see, Lady Rhondda and Lady Astor, as well as his criticism of men retreating into traditionally female passivity or even softness is obviously linked to the perception of gender roles rather than to preference for sexuality.

Dethronement by Feminism

The dragging of Orwell down from his pedestal was likely to happen after the peak of the Orwell cult in the 1980s and that it was accomplished by feminist criticism is – with some hindsight – reasonable. After all, Orwell's views on women seriously contradict his claim for the stature of a champion of decency and moral fairness. The force of the beat of feminist criticism might be explained by the fact that the hagiography which drew mainly on a selective reading of his corpus concealed the quite fallible human being with his quite contradictory and therefore overlooked statements in the background. His shortcomings remained unchallenged for a long time: thus, the blow was all the more forceful. Daphne Patai's *The Orwell Mystique* of 1980, the first and only book-long feminist critique of Orwell's oeuvre, traced all of his shortcomings back to his hypertrophied masculinity. Androcentrism, writes Patai, "unifies Orwell's diverse pet peeves, his fear of socialism and the machine, his nostalgia for the past, his misogyny, his attraction to the experience of war, and the conservatism apparent in his carefully circumscribed challenge to hierarchy and inequality" (14). Beatrix Campbell in *Wigan Pier Revisited*, written in 1984, also pointed out Orwell's masculine concern, his focus on unemployment and deprivation as phenomena concerning primarily the male members of the population. She observed that the poor conditions of the industrial north fascinated Orwell only in respect of male miners and the equally arduous female labour deployed in the cotton industry avoided his attention.

John Rodden argues that beside the feminist inclination to ignore the necessary priority of the issues of fascism, communism and economic depression over the issues of gender in Orwell's time, his exceptionally unfortunate case with feminist critics could be due to his exalted status as a champion of justice and decency. "How can one be a truly 'popular' hero," asks Rodden, "and not stand as the champion of half of humanity? Feminists across the political spectrum ask, justly, about Orwell. [...] Fairly, or not, feminists have

expected more of Orwell than of his contemporaries, they have wanted him to be Trilling's and Spender's 'extraordinary ordinary man' on women's issues too" (224). And realising that he did not meet their expectations, their disappointment has been strong. Heightened expectations, as always, have led to a more intense feeling of resentment, giving way to absolute rejection: the feminist revision has been the strongest challenge to Orwell's reputation. The issues he was so concerned with – politics, economy, poverty, class-distinctions – were ones belonging to the public realm traditionally assigned to be dealt with and solved by men and he displayed no sensitivity to the "petty disasters" of women, as he termed women's concerns in a review of a female author in 1946 (*CW* 18, 175).

The exclusion of 'common woman' from his notion of 'common man' was not only a linguistic carelessness to which he was otherwise especially alert. Consequently, "many women," says Rodden, "cannot 'read themselves into' Orwell very easily. They come to him with the expectation that he speaks to 'the common reader', only to find the dialogue virtually closed. His reader seems to be the common *male* reader, and the disappointment is keen" (225). In the eyes of feminists, Orwell's blindness to women's issues and his own emphatic masculinity calls into question, perhaps even invalidates, his commitment to social justice. Unfortunately, his exploration of racial and economic oppression was never coupled with a revelation of gender polarisation, the values dictated by his 'democratic socialism' failed to question the notion of male superiority. It is this weakness which, feminists contend, invalidates his concern for social justice. As Patai complains, his gender ideology "conflicts with his attacks on hierarchy and injustice, which remain woefully incomplete, even hypocritical" ("Despair" 88).

A Phobia of Feminism

There is no way of denying that Orwell did much to let feminists down. That he was "not sensitive" to women's rights, as Rodden puts it, is euphemistic for the intolerance he displayed towards feminists and birth control supporters in his time. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* he included feminists and "birth-control fanatics" in his (in)famous list of "cranks" – fruit-juice drinkers, nudists, sandal-wearers, sex-maniacs, Quakers, 'Nature Cure' quacks and pacifists – all these are assumed to be attracted with "magnetic force" to socialism, thereby threatening its renown (*CW* 5, 161). No wonder that he invited the label "anti-crank crank". Roger Fowler points out that lists, or in Hakan Ringbom's study of Orwell's language "series", are highly typical of Orwell when passionate and damning. The syntax of listing has a levelling effect, it implies that the items in the list are much the same and using the plural forms of the items suggests a highly stereotypical thinking. Fowler is very much critical on Orwell's use of lists:

The use of list structures [...] is an extreme and absurd technique of criticism. Lists lack logic and discrimination. They reduce everything to the same level, and therefore are offensive to some of things listed, which quite obviously have merit outside of this context: Quakers and tinned food, for instance. If Orwell is not making clear discriminations in this list, it is because he is proceeding in a tone of raucous mockery; it is, however, close to intemperance and intolerance (59).

Other disdainful remarks on feminists suggest that the inclusion of feminists in the list was not only for the purpose of “raucous mockery.” In the dark vision of the future he depicted in a letter to Brenda Salkeld in 1933 Orwell considered a “fearful tribe” of feminists to be one of the threats to civilisation. He reflected on two directions toward which the world could move: a complete overthrow of the present order by means of a revolution or the continuing and consummate hegemony of business accompanied by the feminists’ coming into power:

A few years ago I thought it rather fun to reflect that our civilisation is doomed, but now it fills me above all else with boredom to think of the horrors that will be happening within ten years – either some appalling calamity, with revolution and famine, or else all-round trustification and Fordification, with the entire population reduced to docile wage-slaves, our lives utterly in the hands of the bankers, and a fearful tribe of Lady Astors and Lady Rhonddas et hoc genus riding us like succubi in the name of Progress (*CW* 10, 317).

It is worth giving the two ladies mentioned in this apocalyptic vision a more objective assessment. Nancy Astor, the first woman to enter the House of Commons, was a member of parliament throughout almost all of Orwell’s career, from 1919 until 1945. She was an advocate of temperance and women’s rights. She campaigned to lower the age for women’s suffrage to twenty one, for equal rights in the Civil Service and was a supporter of the nursery schools of Margaret McMillan. In the year when Nancy Astor took her seat in the House of Commons, there was another woman candidate for a seat, even more scandalous, in the august body of the House of Lords, Lady Rhondda, born Margaret Haig Thomas. Having joined the Pankhursts’ organisation, the Women’s Social and Political Union, and having carried out small acts of militancy in the fight for women’s vote in the early 1900s, it was matter-of-course that Margaret Rhondda should attempt to take the seat of her deceased father – with whom she was on good terms and worked closely during the First World War – in the House of Lords in 1919. The lords were, of course, terrified and quickly set up committees to reject her claim. The House of Lords admitted women into its body only in 1958. In a debate between Lady Rhondda and G.K. Chesterton over the question of the (un)desirability of leisured women in society, Bernard Shaw, the chair, introduced Lady Rhondda as the terror of the House of Lords. “She is a peeress

in her own right. She is also an extremely capable woman of business, and the House of Lords has risen up and said, 'If Lady Rhondda comes in here, we go away!' They feel there would be such a show-up of the general business ignorance and imbecility of the male sex as never was before" (Quoted by Eastman, *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 March 1920)

Viscount Rhondda had left to his daughter not only his title, but full possession and control of his properties. She inherited an active place in the financial world and she kept her feet. She was considered a talented and successful businesswoman (*CW* 10, 317). In 1920 she founded an independent weekly, *Time and Tide*, whose editing she took over from the initial editor in 1926. A large number of the contributors to the magazine were women: Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Virginia Woolf, Crystal Eastman, Nancy Astor, Emmeline Pankhurst, Olive Schreiner, Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, Naomi Mitchison, and Elisabeth Robins. As Margaret Rhondda put it in its first issue, *Time and Tide* came into being in order to fill a gap in the press. The idea behind it was to create "a paper which is in fact concerned neither specially with men nor specially with women, but with human beings. [...] the press of today, although with self-conscious, painstaking care it now inserts 'and women' every time it chances to use the word 'men' scarcely succeeds in attaining to such an ideal!" (*Time and Tide*, 14 May 1920) Though the magazine must have lost some of its early feminist zeal as the Second World War loomed, there is some irony in the fact that Orwell found his first war-time job in 1940 as a regular movie and theatre reviewer for this, in its hay-day, feminist periodical.

Not belying the link between patriotism and a profound interest in population policy, his increasing patriotism during the Second World War made Orwell all the more adamant on birth control, a main issue of feminism. As a mitigating circumstance Rodden emphasises the importance of evaluating Orwell's stance against contraception within the larger context of raging eugenics in the first decades of the century. The eugenic propagation for selective breeding and the sterilisation of the C3 population promoted by such controversial figures as Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger definitely brought discredit on the contraception campaign, but it does not justify Orwell's understanding of procreation as a public issue to be handled on the basis of the needs of the nation. Such a point of view emerges from assessing the population as a source of power, which beside Malthusianism and Eugenics, has been one of the main anti-individual discourses trespassing on women's reproductive rights (Yuval-Davis 34).

Furthermore, it cannot at all be claimed with certainty that Orwell was more than superficially familiar with the movement. His disparagement of "birth-control fanatics" *might* refer to Marie Stopes but that he "evidently equated the movement with Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger" as Rodden claims, is only a conjecture, with no evidence in Orwell's texts. He never put the names of these two women or the word 'eugenics' down on paper. The awareness of his lifelong preoccupation with people of disadvantageous background invites one to

surmise that familiarity with slogans promoting the curtailment of unwanted population would have set his hypersensitivity to abuse in action. Stopes was shining in Britain in the 1910s and 20s, by the 30s she was fading as opposition to her extreme position hardened. By the time Orwell pronounced his anti-contraception stance, her activities – though not their effects – were a thing of the past. The only vague reference by Orwell to eugenics justifies it: “Thirty years ago, even ten or fifteen years ago, to advocate smaller families was a mark of enlightenment. The key phrases were ‘surplus population’ and ‘the multiplication of the unfit’” (CW 19, 82).

Orwell’s anti-contraception stance was not so much a demonstration against “birth-control fanatics” as a result of an essentially public-minded and conservative way of thinking, looking upon child-bearing mainly as a source of national vitality. In “The English People” he expressed anxiety about the dwindling English birth-rate – in times of war a logical and expected reaction for a public-minded patriot. He proposed the classical remedy: encouraging child bearing through favourable economic policies, including lightened taxation:

The philoprogenitive instinct will probably return when fairly large families are already the rule, but the first steps towards this must be economic ones. [...] Any government, by a few strokes of the pen, could make childlessness as unbearable an economic burden as a big family is now: but no government has chosen to do so, because of the ignorant idea that a bigger population means more unemployed. Far more drastically than anyone has proposed hitherto, taxation will have to be graded so as to encourage child-bearing and to save women with young children from being obliged to work outside the home (CW 16, 223).

His proposal for child-friendly measures (kindergartens, play-grounds, bigger and more convenient flats, free education) was unfortunately coupled with the idea of keeping women beside the stove, harsher penalties for abortion and a disapproval of the tendency to avoid the drudgery a large family imposes on women. Orwell’s concern was demographically adequate breeding and lacked any consideration of procreation as a private matter of individuals. Being anxious for his country in the shadow of the threateningly increasing population of Nazi Germany, he regarded birth-control and abortion as impediments to the growth of the English population. The thought that these means are devices for women to control their own bodies and lives apparently never occurred to him. Orwell’s proposals in “The English People” are, according to Woodcock, “probably the most truly reactionary he ever made, including such familiar devices as the crushing penal taxation of childless people and a more rigorous repression of abortion. It shows Orwell at his most authoritarian, but it also shows an aspect of his thought which cannot be ignored” (261).

But What is the Matter with Women?

Feminism aside, having an aversion for the movement, its concerns and for some of its members does not explain away Orwell's often expressly contemptuous attitude towards women. Rodden is incorrect when he criticises feminists on the grounds that their charges of Orwell's misogyny and contempt for women "equate his scattered comments dismissive of feminism with woman-hatred in general" (213). It should not be blurred that Orwell belittled women. That his condescension to women can be deduced from scattered remarks only, does not invalidate the criticism; just as the irregularity of his dismissive remarks about 'Jews' does not exempt him from the charge of his having an anti-Semitic attitude in spite of his declared stance against anti-Semitism. While he knew better than to consciously differentiate based on race or religion, nevertheless, his irritation at Jewish habits justifies his friend Malcolm Muggeridge's conjecture that he was "inclined at times to be vaguely anti-Semitic" (Muggeridge 172).

What shall we think of 'scattered' remarks like "[o]ne of the surest signs of his [Joseph Conrad's] genius is that women dislike his books" (*CEJL* 1, 227), or "[d]oubtless Gissing is right in implying all through his books that intelligent women are very rare animals, and if one wants to marry a woman who is intelligent *and* pretty, then the choice is still further restricted, according to a well-known arithmetical rule. It is like being allowed to choose only among albinos, and left-handed albinos at that" (*CEJL* 4, 431). In our day, when the historical situation allows us to deal with luxuries like the position of women in society, such statements do sound grievous, and there is something to be said against them even if we take the different historical context into consideration. Though feminist criticism has often run to extremes on Orwell's misogyny, it was undeniably Orwell who occasioned the charge.

Facing the charge of misogyny, Rodden warns the reader not to overlook Orwell's respectful comments about feminism and women's issues, which, drawing on Arthur Eckstein's observation, were on the rise from the mid-1940s, while, at the same time, his condescending remarks about feminism and women's capacities diminished greatly (436, n97). Rodden points out that Orwell reviewed Hilda Martindale's *From One Generation to Another* in 1944 and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in 1945 favourably. His praise of Martindale's book is indeed unrestrained but is mainly directed at Martindale's efforts as a factory inspector to expose the atrocious working conditions into which employers forced their female and child labourers until almost the beginning of the Great War. The blunt truth-teller about the working conditions of male labourers in Wigan could not but welcome Martindale, who gave attention to female employees as well, all the more so since she had "none of the bitter anti-masculine feeling that feminist writers used to have." He solemnly concluded that Martindale's "own career, and the self-confidence and independent outlook that she evidently showed from the very start, bear out the

claim that women are the equals of men in everything except physical strength” (CW 17, 271). Unfortunately, the declaration of such a statement ironically bespeaks of a need to be reminded of or convinced by it.

Orwell lavished much less praise on Woolf’s book, which has, of course, become a substantive text of feminist criticism. Noting the central argument of Woolf’s book, the need for women to have financial independence, Orwell cuts his review short and disregards the myriad implications of Woolf’s refined text. He concludes that “[a]t times this book rather overstates the drawbacks from which women suffer, but almost anyone of the male sex could read it with advantage” (CW 17, 288). Patai draws attention to the “uncharacteristically circumspect and wary tone” of the review, “he neither engages the book nor strongly contradicts its premises. He is clearly on his guard” (20). Rodden notes that Orwell’s positive statements – including these reviews – are from the mid-1940s, supporting the impression that Orwell’s views on women’s issues, “though they hardly became progressive, were not static throughout his life” (437, n112). Rodden ascribes the “evolution of his attitudes” possibly to his marriage to Eileen O’Shaughnessy and the adoption of their son. Taking a few positive comments to be an evolution of attitudes, however, disregards the ongoing undercurrent of Orwell’s negative attitude towards women and feminism, which came to the surface from time to time even after he had made concessions. Just after he had been convinced by Martindale’s book and personality that women were not inferior to men, he began shilly-shallying again when he found in a privately conducted sociological ‘survey’ that women could not pass the intelligence test:

Here is a little problem sometimes used as an intelligence test.

A man walked four miles due south from his house and shot a bear. He then walked two miles due west, then walked another four miles due north and was back at his home again. What was the colour of the bear?

The interesting point is that – so far as my own observations go – men usually see the answer to this problem and women do not (CW 16, 277).

In the spring of 1945 as a war correspondent he had the opportunity to observe the municipal elections in France, in which women voted for the first time in French history. Though the caption of his article for the *Manchester Evening News* promises some discussion of this historic event, it cannot be argued that Orwell attributes too much significance to it. Indeed, rather to the contrary, his speculations imply an anxiety at the forthcoming results of women’s “venture into public life.” “By far the most important unknown factor is the attitude of the women,” he writes. Drawing a mysterious connection between the Church and women, he worries that “[i]t is possible that the Church may as in the past, make an authoritative pronouncement against certain political doctrines, especially

Communism: in which case the large female vote might be a very serious handicap for the parties of the Left" (CW 17, 126). Three weeks later he covered the elections for the *Observer*, informing the British that the results showed a general leftward slide. His anxieties and predictions were not justified – he was silent about these just as about women's participation in the vote at all.

In a review of D.H. Lawrence's *The Prussian Officer* he deduces from one of the stories, "The White Stocking", the simple moral that "women behave better if they get a sock on the jaw occasionally" (CW 17, 386). Apropos of Orwell's "Books v. Cigarettes", which appeared in *Tribune* in February 1946, a correspondent justly suspects him of an exclusively male perspective. Intending to examine the question whether low book-consumption is due to the high price of books, Orwell compares reading habits mainly to traditionally male spare-time activities: drinking, smoking, going to the dogs, and the pub. Joyce Sharpey-Shafer wonders whether since women and children "don't appear to need beer and cigarettes as much as men" did that mean he implied they did not need books either (CW 18, 97)? In describing his ideal pub, the Moon Under Water, Orwell displays a similarly male-centric, somewhat paternalistic attitude. The Moon Under Water is an unmistakably nineteenth-century public house in appearance: "its whole architecture and fittings are uncompromisingly Victorian" with grained woodwork, open fires burning in the bars (a separate one for women) – its atmosphere and mentality are similarly Victorian. The motherly barmaids are middle-aged women, who call everyone dear, irrespective of age and sex. The greatest asset of the pub is its garden, where the family members can entertain themselves while Dad is having his fun. The garden "allows whole families to go there instead of Mum having to stay at home and mind the baby while Dad goes out alone." Believing this to be progressive-minded ("It is the puritanical nonsense of excluding children – and therefore, to some extent, women – from pubs that has turned these places into mere boozing shops instead of the family gathering places that they ought to be" [CW 18, 100]), he only fits the need of the family to that of the husband.

An assumption of male superiority is inherent in his citation of Babylonian marriage customs in the columns of *Tribune* (June 1944). He quotes a passage from the Penguin version of *Herodotus*, which gives an account of the system the Babylonians designed to portion out maidens of marriageable age:

Once a year in each village the maidens of an age to marry were collected altogether into one place, while the men stood round them in a circle. Then the herald called up the damsels one by one and offered them for sale. He began with the most beautiful. When she was sold for no small sum of money, he offered for sale the one who came next to her in beauty [...] The custom was that when the herald had gone through the whole number of the beautiful damsels, he should then call up the ugliest and offer her to the men, asking who would agree to take her with the smallest marriage portion. And the man who offered to

take the smallest sum had her assigned to him. The marriage portions were furnished by the money paid for the beautiful damsels, and thus the fairer maidens portioned out the uglier (CW 16, 246).

Unfortunately, Orwell does not elucidate his standpoint on the issue or what his point is at all in setting forth this old patriarchal custom, which flies in the face of the concept of the emancipation of women in the 19th and 20th centuries. The two sentences he adds as a kind of comment and conclusion are ambiguous and uninformative on his assessment of the custom: “This custom seems to have worked very well and Herodotus is full of enthusiasm for it. He adds, however, that, like other good customs, it was already going out round about 450 B.C.” (CW 16, 247). Does he approve of the positive discrimination with which the design helped to even out the inequalities of nature and portioned out the ugly maidens with money received for the beautiful ones? Even if he can be credited with such an egalitarian spirit, the question remains whether he noticed the subordinate relation of human beings inherent in the custom at all. In a letter to David Astor in 1948 he again gave evidence of his doubtful concept of human relations along gender lines. Drawing a comparison between horses and humans, he wrote to Astor: “Bobbie [Astor’s horse] is here & in good form. He is bigger than the other horse, Bill’s mare, & oppresses her a great deal, but she likes being with him, which I suppose shows that women like that kind of thing really” (CW 19, 485).

Significantly, all the examples, mentioned above, of Orwell’s inherent assumption of male superiority are from the mid-1940s, which does not lend support to Rodden’s claims about an evolution in his attitude. Though Orwell summed up his time spent at the BBC during the war as two wasted years (from August 1941 to November 1943) and he came to be very critical of the BBC’s influence on young artists (describing the organisation as “a mixture of whoreshop and lunatic asylum”), it brought him into contact with a wide range of his literary contemporaries, as well as scientists, historians, and politicians. The programmes he had to produce included talks on science, art, politics, and religion, such as discussions of *The Social Contract*, *The Koran*, *Das Kapital*, social problems including minority issues, issues of colour, and the status of women – and because of these he was probably forced to think over some of his ideas. He was alerted, for example, to the delicate issue of the naming of nationalities by the Eurasian writer Cedric Dover. Whereas earlier he admittedly found pleasure in annoying the Scottish by referring to them as “Scotchmen”, during and after his employment at the BBC he emphasised the importance of avoiding insulting nicknames on several occasions and went through *Burmese Days* to change troublesome nationality designations to politically correct ones before the reprinting of his book. However, the impetus was not an internal incentive but an adjustment to external expectations, therefore, a relapse into an old habit was to be expected. In “Revenge is Sour”, written for *Tribune* in November 1945, he dwelt on the absurdity of revengeful emotions occasioned

by the sight of a Jewish Viennese officer getting his own revenge for his people on the Nazis by kicking a captured SS-officer. Criticising the little attention Orwell ever paid to the holocaust and its aftermath, Tosco Fyvel did not conceal his indignation at Orwell's designation of the Viennese officer as "the Jew" and "the little Jew" right through the article (180).

The BBC might have exerted some influence on his views on women's issues as well. Contemplating the possible relation of Yeats' political conservatism and his leaning towards occultism, Orwell claims that "[t]hose who dread the prospect of universal suffrage, popular education, freedom of thought, emancipation of women, will start off with a predilection towards secret cults" (CW 14, 282). Universal suffrage and emancipation of women are very unorwellian concerns, what's more, the terms are rarely if ever used in his writings. By the time Orwell wrote the review on Yeats, he had been working for a year and a half at the BBC, where – among others – he was responsible for organising the talks of "The Cradle and the Desk", a series discussing the emancipation of women. In describing the programme to Ethel Mannin in a 1942 invitation to her, however, he included his personal reservations about the need for and (male) desirability of women's emancipation: "This, of course, is a subject of great interest in India, and roughly what we want discussed is how far women benefit by escaping from home and whether in the long run it is desirable for them to undertake the same work as men" (CW 13, 474). Just as the BBC – through the people he met there and worked with – might have prompted him to think twice about nationalities, he might have been impelled to conform to progressive views on issues of gender. However, beside the quite few positive statements, denigrating phrases kept popping up from time to time just as in the 1930s, which suggests that, running counter to the assumption of a developing attitude, his ideas basically remained unchanged. Negative statements, unfortunately, weigh more heavily than positive ones, they even tend to invalidate or considerably decrease the honesty of the latter. What is more, the upheaval of patriotic feeling triggered by the Second World War involved, as the final part of this paper will show, acceptance of the regressive gender policy of mainstream society and a confirmation of traditional gender roles.

National Loyalty, Popular Culture and All That Follow

Orwell's patriotic transformation at the outbreak of the Second World War precipitated a commitment to majority society and his writings on English popular culture can be seen as the by-product of his new ideological identity as a socialist patriot (Rai 101). After a tradition of elitist assumptions about the rigid categories of high and low culture, Orwell's initiative to study popular art seriously, and thereby bridge the gulf between the intellectual and the common man, is now seen as a radical change in outlook. An important legacy of Orwell for popular culture criticism, says Rodden, was to demonstrate how popular art offered insight into the public mind and to alert readers to ideologies underlying

such works of art (233). Whereas having a sharp eye, as always, for political tendencies, Orwell pointed out the conservative outlook inherent in popular culture, for example, in popular boys' weeklies (*The Gem* and *The Magnet*); his reception of music hall comedies and seaside postcards suggests that he was blind to the equally conservative and regressive gender policy underlying much of the humour of popular culture. In the review of *Applesauce* for *Time and Tide* in 1940, he insists on the importance of the continued existence of the Max Miller-type English comedian, who specialises in "utter baseness": "They express something which is valuable in our civilisation and which might drop out of it in certain circumstances" (CW 12, 253). Beside lowness and vulgarity, their great virtue is that "their genius is entirely masculine" and "they are intensely national". Vulgarity is an exclusively masculine (perhaps even virile) virtue – "a woman cannot be low without being disgusting" (CW 12, 253). Something similar is suggested by Orwell's lament that "English humour was being 'purified' for the benefit of a new, largely feminine, public" in his 1949 review of *The English Comic Album* (CW 20, 12).

An analysis of the comic seaside postcards of Donald McGill, which appeared in *Horizon* in 1941 and was reprinted in *Critical Essays* in 1946, gave Orwell an opportunity to relegate men and women to their appropriate tasks and roles in life. The examination of the postcards is launched by calling for the cooperation of the imaginary reader: "Get hold of a dozen of these things," "spread them out on a table," "What do you see?" "What do these things remind you of?" "What are they so like?" are the imperatives and interrogatives marking the dialogic stance – of course answers are provided to the questions to guide the reader to the preferred point of view: "Your first impression is of overpowering vulgarity. [...] Your second impression, however, is of indefinable familiarity" (CW 13, 24). Roger Fowler notes that the orders and schoolmasterly questions suggest an "energetic interrogator who is putting great pressure on the reader to agree with Orwell's interpretation of this cultural phenomenon" (45).

After a neutral, even critical, analysis of outlook, content, typical subject matter, language and target audience of comic postcards, the essay in the second half develops into a highly subjective assessment of the virtues the postcards are intended to represent – indeed the last passages constitute an ode to, and defence of, their "overpowering vulgarity", their "ever-present obscenity" and their "utter lowness of mental atmosphere." The woman with the stuck-out behind, the voluptuous figure with the body-hugging dress and with breasts and buttocks grossly over-emphasised is a dominant, recurrent motif of the postcards even when the joke has nothing to do with sex. "There can be no doubt," concludes Orwell, "that these pictures lift the lid off a very widespread repression, natural enough in a country whose women when young tend to be slim to the point of skimpishness" (CW 13, 27). But here Orwell makes a distinction between the McGill postcards and papers like *The Esquire* and *La Vie Parisienne*. Whereas the humour of McGill's postcards only gains meaning with a strict moral code in the background, the imaginary background of the jokes in *The Esquire* and *La*

Vie Parisienne is promiscuity, "the utter breakdown of all standards" (CW 13, 27). Bound up with this, says Orwell, is the tendency of the well-to-do, *Esquire*-type women to prolong their youth and preserve their sexual attraction with cosmetics and the avoidance of child-bearing. As opposed to this, "youth's a stuff will not endure" is the normal attitude, the "ancient wisdom" that McGill reflects by allowing no transition figures between the honeymoon couple and the glamourless Mum and Dad. Expecting a drop in the standard of living (in 1941 with due reason) and a rise in the birth-rate, Orwell is looking forward to the retreat of young-at-forty, face-lifted ladies and the reappearance of drudges exhausted by housework and a succession of child-beds. "When it comes to the pinch," writes Orwell, "human beings are heroic. Women face childbed and the scrubbing brush, revolutionaries keep their mouths shut in the torture chamber, battleships go down with their guns still firing when their decks are awash" (CW 13, 30). The McGill postcards, concludes Orwell, are a sort of rebellion against virtue and the seriousness of life. The Sancho Panza element in man, "the lazy, cowardly, debt-bilking adulterer" cannot entirely be suppressed and will find an outlet from time to time: "On the whole, human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time" (CW 13, 30).

The world Orwell envisages with overly good human beings is a sharply divided world with heroic men acting, fighting and dying glorified in the public realm and equally heroic women accomplishing their less noble task of bearing children, scrubbing with their brushes (implying the assumption that the two necessarily go hand in hand) and ending their lives quietly, deprived of any exploit deserving the attention of posterity. The McGill postcards invert this order for a moment, but, quite significantly, only with respect to men. The jokes reveal the unofficial self, whose "tastes lie towards safety, soft beds, no work, pots of beer and women with 'voluptuous' figures. He it is who punctures your fine attitudes and urges you to look after Number One, to be unfaithful to your wife, to bilk your debts, and so on and so forth" (CW 13, 29). Apart from being self-contradictory by acknowledging a wish for promiscuity condemned in the world of *The Esquire* and *La Vie Parisienne*, rebellion is only seen from a male perspective. In the nature of the momentary wish of women facing "childbed and the scrubbing brush" Orwell was not interested, or perhaps it did not occur to him, that they could have such momentary wishes at all. If McGill's postcards primarily addressed men, Orwell surely did not question or even find it peculiar enough to mention. He accepted uncritically the sexual stereotypes and gender ideology underlying the majority of such post cards.

George Woodcock in *The Crystal Spirit* shrewdly establishes a link between the McGill postcard image of worn-out housewives and the prole woman hanging out her washing in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston Smith feels a "mystical reverence" for the woman tormented but not crushed down by her share of life.

The woman down there has no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart, and a fertile belly. He wondered how many children she had given birth to. It might easily be fifteen. She had had her momentary flowering, a year, perhaps, of wildrose beauty, and then she had suddenly swollen like a fertilized fruit and grown hard and red and coarse, and then her life had been laundering, scrubbing, darning, cooking, sweeping, polishing, mending, scrubbing, laundering, first for children, then for grandchildren, over thirty unbroken years. At the end of it she was still singing (*CW* 9, 229).

The idealisation of the self-sacrificing maternal woman affirms Orwell's adherence to a society based on sexual polarisation. As long as the woman bears and rears children, there is no risk of her interfering with the man's world and thereby threatening his privileges. Patai is right in observing that Orwell "lives in a mental space peopled largely by men, with women providing the domestic background for the activities of men, breeding and rearing the next generation, and of course valorizing the masculine role by embodying a contrasting and inferiorized femininity" (249).

Conclusion

Far from precipitating an evolution of his attitude to women and feminism, Orwell's turn towards the nation, held together by essentially conserving forces, like tradition, national customs, culture, the family, and virtues like commitment, self-sacrifice, courage; this volte-face deepened his adherence to a normative society that assigns well-defined roles to men and women and shows intolerance towards phenomena and people not fitting its requirements. George L. Mosse points out that the stepping over of the boundaries of roles poses a hazard to a society whose functioning depends on the acceptance and prevalence of a traditional value system in which masculine values like honour, loyalty and the submission of the individual to higher goals are a main force (12). In this sense masculinity and the adherence to traditional masculine values, according to Mosse, is a conservative phenomenon and restricts individual freedom. Smelling abnormal or unconventional manners and behaviour, like those involved in feminism or homosexuality, manliness "pulls in the reins", strengthens the conventional, the years between the two world wars being an especially regressive period from such an aspect (Mosse 168). Orwell was unfortunately no exception to the period that Cunningham describes as being well immersed in misogyny. Though keen on collecting grievances and hypersensitive to abuse wherever he found it, be it imperial oppression in India or political terror in Spain, he was not perceptive to the much subtler abuses involved in gender polarisation. The curve from a terror of a "fearful tribe" of feminists to the uncritical acceptance of the male perspective of popular culture is not much of

an evolution of attitude deserving defence, not even if the recognition of this aspect of Orwell's ethos involves our being deprived of an intellectual hero.

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