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Between a Pit and a Throne: How Medieval Thought Affects a Modern America

In an interview for Time magazine, famous actress Helen Mirren was asked about the context of the feminine roles she has previously played. Mirren explained she had played both extremes of women. She played a role, which was given only “Mother” as a name, in the movie *The Mosquito Coast*. Mother “was always in the kitchen and supporting her husband, never arguing.” In a previous movie, *Excalibur*, Mirren played an “evil, sexually voracious witch woman.” Mirren’s strategy of transforming herself into these contradictory roles was to think, “Cool, I can play the two sides of the coin of male fantasy about women”.

The male fantasy Mirren speaks of is the “good girl/bad girl” fantasy. Men want their women to be innocent and sexy, virginal and experienced, opinionated and submissive (Kilbourne). They want a stable wife and mother but also an exciting, flirty girlfriend. This places strain on the men who hope to find a woman who fits inside the box culture has labeled “womanhood.” It places an even greater strain on the women who have been taught they must master both sides of this fantasy. It is believed that gender is “far more dependent on social learning than on genetic makeup” (Mollenkott 61). Following this belief, the contradictory idea of femininity must have been placed before women as truth by means of our society and culture. But this view of women is not a new idea in the 21st century. This “binary ideology which cast women as [both]

virgin and whore” has been handed down to us throughout history (Bitel 194). The legacy of these contradictory roles for women affects American women still today.

During the middle ages women were constantly caught between “pit and throne” (Barger 22). The basis of this quandary stems from the medieval church authorities. Most of a community’s biblical knowledge was handed to them by the leaders of their church. Most people did not read the Bible individually, but instead relied on the teachings of the authorities. Because the clergy had confusing views on femininity, those views were passed along to the women in their community. The clergy connected women to the legacy left by Biblical women such as Eve and Mary. By looking at the lives of these women, the church leaders came to believe women were to be “simultaneously despised as daughters of Eve, the temptress, and adored in the tradition of the Virgin Mary” (Martin 21). It was not an intentional contradiction, but more an unspoken one. The clergy could not find a suitable compromise between the two Biblical women, and therefore taught what they saw as truth.

Most women during the medieval era considered themselves Christians (Bitel 131). Typical medieval Christianity was based on the penance system. Sins were cleansed through the punishment of the sinner rather than the blood of Jesus. There were many laws written concerning how much penance was required for specific sins. These laws were written by men, because women were not given any authority in the church at this time. About a quarter of the laws dealt with matters of sexuality and women (128). Centuries later, Virginia Woolf spoke a relevant statement about men who wrote about women, saying they typically had, “no qualification [to be writing] save they were not women” (1939). The men who wrote these laws wrote them from a male perspective and

slanted the penance accordingly. Because of the lack of women's participation in religion and law making, the laws followed the suit of the belief system and consequently both protected and degraded women. The laws protected women's virginity but also assigned harsher punishment to women than to men for sexual sins (129). Many of the rules implied a more evil constitution to women, following in the vein of Eve. Women's faults and sins in these texts were presented as "variations of basic design" as if to suggest women could not dodge the legacy left for them through Eve (129). A woman may or may not have actually read these rules for herself or "obeyed them to the letter, but she surely received messages regarding Christian behaviors from [the men] that did" (125). The authority of the church made sure the rules were followed by women across the class-system.

Because of Eve, women were given the stereotype of a temptress or seductress. "Eve carries the weight of the world's woes, the curse of woman, [and] the supposed gullibility and inferiority of her gender" (Barger 134). The gullibility of women comes into play in Genesis 3 when the snake convinces Eve to disobey the word of her Lord by conveying a "sense of lack where there [was] no lack" (136). Eve then passed this feeling of inadequacy along to her partner, Adam. Because of Eve's success in swaying Adam, she was viewed as a seductive temptress; for it was believed Adam never would have sinned if not tempted by Eve. The clergy looked at Eve as representation that women were the "devil's gateway" to sin (152.) They chose to avoid the obvious text showing Adam as a fully functioning human being capable of making his own cognitive decisions, and focus instead on Eve's deceit. It was popularly believed that "it was Eve's role as temptress that caused Adam to fall, and ever since then, woman has tempted man"

(Schmidt 44). What Eve did with her God-given freedom has become the feminine legacy and has been used by man to “control women and determine [their] futures” (135).

This control over women was not given divinely to man. Before the fall, the relationship between man and woman was perfect, as was the relationship between humanity and divinity. After sin entered the world, both of these relationships suffered. Trying to fulfill the void left by God when the relationship was severed, the woman attempted to feel complete through the man. She unconsciously raised him to the level of God, attempting to regain those relationships. Man’s response to this elevation in status was to assume dominion over the woman. Man began attempting to define the boundaries of the woman’s existence (138). Adam immediately named the woman, Eve which means “the mother of all things.” This label confined Eve’s identity to childbearing, the role God had condemned to bring woman the most pain (138).

It is hard to understand how the clergy could hold such extreme views of Eve and yet still sanctify the Virgin Mary in their church. It was obvious that the theories about Eve could not universally describe all women at all times or else Mary would have to be viewed in the same light. The theory of villainous women seems to be the belief of what women are at the core, whereas the theory concerning Mary seems to be pertaining to what women ought to strive to become. It was believed that the only way for women to reach spiritual righteousness was to “escape her female identity,” in essence, the identity left by Eve and assume the identity left to them by the Virgin Mary (151). Mary’s identity was one of “perpetual virginity” (153). Although this is not supported biblically, as the scripture states that Jesus had siblings, this was the common belief of the clergy. The virgin birth that was meant to fulfill Old Testament prophesy, had been shifted into a

value statement about Mary (149). Mary was a normal teenage girl who had a call from God to be obedient. Mary's obedience is one to be emulated, but does not set her up to be inducted into the "realm of the divine" as the church has done (148). It is also important to note that even Mary was considered a "bad girl" in her day as she was recognized as being pregnant outside of wedlock. In order to make Mary an example of holiness, the clergy had to make her untouched by sexual desire. The repercussions of this theory hold women up to a divine motherhood, unimpeded by sexual pleasure. In order for woman to have a position within the medieval church, they had to make an oath of perpetual virginity and give up their feminine heritage for "the female body must be forever contained and enshrined on the pedestal of virginity lest it wreak havoc on the world" (148).

Along with Eve, Mary's "divine motherhood" has been blanketed over all women as their example. As women had been confined to that role through Eve, Mary set the bar to a height that no woman would be able to obtain. Mary defined motherhood as a "passive...forever-sacrificing, and codependent" act (148). Through Mary's motherhood, the clergy put her in the position of being partially responsible for undoing the world's sins, as if to make up for Eve's responsibility for those sins. It has been said of Mary that she is "the perfect mother, unpolluted by sensuality and ready to intercede for the world" (Barger 152). It is interesting that both the extremes of women, Eve and Mary, were confined to a role of motherhood. This may have helped mold the modern view of keeping women in their "rightful place."

These views of women were taught prevalently from the pulpit during the Middle Ages. Today these views are preached using a different medium: the media. Some may

argue that the effects of a message straight from the clergy may have more credence than one spoken through movies, advertising, and music, but the ramifications are the same, if not worse. The medieval church held nothing back in exposing the contradictions in their beliefs. Today, media has become very good at the art of “sugarcoating.” Unlike medieval women, many women today have not picked up on the message and do not know they are held to such standards, although all American women are exposed to the message and most feel the implications of the stereotypes.

It is close to impossible to go through an average American day and not be exposed to some form of media. The media is not all negative, and in fact may in some cases enrich American entertainment and pastimes. The problem is that media is not just entertainment. Video games, television, movies, and advertisements portray more than just amusement. Although the main intention of these forms of media is to produce a profit, these styles of media sell more than what immediately meets the eye. They sell values, images, and concepts about love, sex, romance, success, and possibly the most destructive, normalcy. Media helps to tell women who they are and who they should become (Kilbourne). Unfortunately, the media is not sending American women any more of a clearer message than the clergy sent medieval women. Women are drastically underrepresented in the media, but when they are seen, more often than not, it is in light of the Mary vs. Eve tradition.

One of the largest strands of media today is America’s infatuation with celebrities. Famous actors, singers, and television stars are all over tabloids, reality TV, and the news. From these “role models,” today’s women learn the only things that matters about them are their looks and the content of their purses. Also, different women

are glorified for different reasons. Mylie Cyrus is quickly becoming the next “American Sweetheart.” This title in and of itself connotes a pure, simplistic lifestyle. But America cannot be content with a simple, pure preteen. One of the reasons Cyrus has become so popular is the question of whether she can keep up her “good girl” status, or will she fall into the trap held open by Lindsey Lohan and Brittany Spears. The problem with either outcome is the viewers receive a tainted and exaggerated report. The real Cyrus, being human, is not a picture of perfection. If, someday, she does travel down the wrong road, she will still probably not become the seductive temptress for which some men hope. Another example of an exaggerated celebrity is Angelina Jolie. She has gone through a tabloid transformation from America’s bad girl to a generous philanthropist. Most of these stories are grounded in truth, but have been exaggerated for shock value. Holding these women up as role models can be confusing to the mainstream women.

Another medium enhancing this contradiction is the video game industry. These electronic games have become a major form of media within the last decade. Games are becoming more complex and beginning to look more like reality, except in one area; femininity. Women are very rarely the main characters in video games. When women are shown in games, it is typically in a very sexual way. In *Grand Theft Auto*, women can be bought as prostitutes and then killed for money. In *Duke Nukem*, most of the women are dancing on poles or in need of rescuing. One exception to this rule is *Tomb Raider*. Laura Croft is the main character in the game, and is shown as a strong woman who is in no need of a “prince charming”. The problem with this game comes with the representation of Croft. She is an obvious depiction of a sexual masculine fantasy. She is a very busty, long-legged, scantily clad woman with big guns. She is the ultimate “bad

girl” and came to fit this stereotype even more when the game became a movie. The actress chosen to play Croft was Angelina Jolie. Although Croft is beautiful, the bad girl image is not enough to sell games. During a specific level of *Tomb Raider*, the gamer can choose to play Croft as a young preteen. This choice has no bearing on the game or the storyline, it is simply a special feature added on to procure a greater profit. This young, innocent Croft acts more like a young girl in her speech and actions, but is still just as well endowed as the adult version (Hutemann). It seems as though men can have the best of both worlds by playing with the preteen tomb raider.

Another development in the prolonged contradiction of Eve vs. Mary is the modern music industry. This is the one industry where women are well represented in numbers. But even with this improvement, many of the songs show a major contradiction. Brittany Spears, a major teenage icon, has grossed millions of dollars through her music. One of her popular songs describes a women’s take on this controversy. In the song “I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman,” Spears epitomizes the struggle women feel in the media. Women are not allowed to be one or the other. Spears describes that she needs a “moment in time” to decide who she is based on society’s standards. Another music superstar, Usher, helps his listeners to understand a man’s take on what society says women should be. In his song “Yeah,” Usher describes that he wants a “lady in the street, but a freak in the bed.” He wants a woman who can act lady-like and behave in a pure, innocent way, and then turn right around and become the seductive temptress the medieval clergy tried so hard to eliminate. These conventional songs were played on many popular radio stations and television channels in their peak.

Major airplay of these songs helped spread the message that women can become these two stereotypes and play both roles to satisfy their men.

The best representation of these contradictory roles is portrayed in advertising. This 180 billion dollar a year business has to find ways to present what they wish to say in either a 30 second sound byte or simply a picture (Kilbourne). In order to accomplish this, it is typical for advertisers to avoid the need for character development by using standard stereotypes that will be recognized quickly by the average consumer. Some advertisements use women as simply a “decorative function,” while others show a very domesticated woman (Matlin 2). Using sex to sell products has become a major tool used by the industry. Women have become objectified in advertising. They are no longer considered a total human in some cases but rather a single body part. Breasts and other female body parts have become recognized social icons. Women’s dismembered bodies have been used to sell everything from fingernail polish to fishing line (Kilbourne). Advertisements like these tell girls that the only thing that matters about them is their body. Women’s bodies are used to tempt people into buying products. In this light, some products, such as alcohol bottles, are made in the shape of women’s bodies to make them more attractive to the consumer. In other ads, the consumer’s attraction to products is compared to man’s attraction to women. This objectification takes away much worth women have and replaces it with simply that of the seductive temptress or a sex toy.

Showing women in spousal role, other advertisements show women doing very domestic activities such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children. These ads box women into the role of “mother.” Women in these ads are typically seen, just as the mother in *The Mosquito Coast*, as obedient maids who is simply there to take care of

their husbands and children and clean up messes after the rest of the family has left to play in the backyard. In the new Neosporin To-Go ads, women are shown as being always prepared, having to have 20/20 foresight as to when their child is going to be in need. This view of motherhood is unachievable and keeps real women questioning their personal identities.

Perhaps an even more disturbing image of women seen in fashion ads. Women are portrayed as “helpless six year olds” (Matlin 2). They are shown in childish clothing and yet they are showing cleavage. Women in advertising are typically standing in very passive or vulnerable positions. Sometimes they are even being overpowered by men. In a very telling ad for Baby Soft perfume, a woman is sitting in a very short dress, cut to show cleavage, with pigtails while holding a lollipop (Kilbourne). Ads like these show the inconsistency to which women are held. Can a woman be both seductive and naïve? In an advertisement for Fetish perfume the copy reads, “Apply liberally to your neck so he can smell it as you shake your head no.” This implies that women do not mean no when they say it. It implies that women are attempting to be seductive even while they are refusing sex (Kilbourne). The woman’s word stands for nothing, up against the harsh realities of women’s contradictory social roles.

Recognizing Pandora’s Box of “womanhood” leaves no room to doubt the statistic stating over 12 million women a year are diagnosed with depression in America. The statistic makes even more sense because it has been said that the personality traits desired by society in women describe those of a person with a personality disorder. (Mollenkott 60). Although women are stuck between different personalities in society’s eyes, they are viewed in a very radical way by their Creator. They are viewed by Him as

His creations, His design. They are viewed as beings that have both strengths and weaknesses. They were created individually for the enjoyment of God with very different personalities.

The light in the darkness is that God holds no woman to the stereotypes created by Eve and Mary. Eve and Mary were not even held to these standards. Both women were created in God's image, as was the rest of the female sex. The different personalities of women exemplify the different facets of God's personality. Possibly, the even better news is men and women were created alike in God's image. "The media world often represents men and women as living in separate spheres," almost reminiscent of the writings of Rousseau (Matlin 2). The truth can be found back in the Garden of Eden where these contradictions began. Man was created from the dust of the Earth which God deemed as "good." Woman was then created from the rib of Adam, from his very flesh. God called the creation of woman "very good." Woman was given God's blessing from the very beginning. Eve was created to be Adam's helper. The Hebrew word for helper is *ezer* which was to be "one who was equal to the task man had before him" (Barger 135). This word is the same word used to describe God in the book of Hebrews. More than anything else, God has called women to be His children, His disciples, His followers. Women throughout history have only been viewed in one way by God: His Beloved.

Not long ago on national television there was an unexpected "wardrobe malfunction" during a widely viewed event. The response of the perpetrator was nothing more than an apology for offending some of the audience. Perhaps society's views depict yet another malfunction -- a "womanhood malfunction." Truth be known, there is no

apology necessary for the offenses of the “womanhood malfunction.” Instead it simply needs to be brought into the light, to be analyzed by all women that they may be educated about their identity and thus portray themselves as creations of the Lord most High, designed with a purpose, and a fulfilling one at that.

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