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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### MEN AND WOMEN

As long as there are men and women, there will be an audience for books about men and women. Most of the studies now in print embrace a general principle amiably enunciated by James Thurber and E. B. White in **Is Sex Necessary?** (Harper, 1929; 1975, paper; Queen's House, 1977, cloth): "While the urge to eat is a personal matter which concerns no one but the person hungry . . . the sex urge involves, for its true expression, another individual. It is this 'other individual' that causes all the trouble."

The chief focus of historian Carl Degler's **At Odds** (Oxford, 1980) is on the *modus vivendi* that evolved between the sexes during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Citing letters, diaries, medical writings, and other evidence, he disposes of several myths: that the Victorians shrouded sex in a "conspiracy of silence"; that the "cult of domesticity," which kept middle-class women in the home, was a kind of male conspiracy.

Rather, Degler shows, women championed domesticity—and solidified their control over all aspects of family life. They wielded their moral authority to combat prostitution, alcohol abuse, and the exploitation of working-class women.

As for sex, what restraint there was represented a strategy by women to free themselves from unwanted pregnancies. Aided by doctors, 19th-century wives also experimented with birth control and abortion, though without consistent success.

All of this coincided with the first feminist movement in Europe and America. "We have had the morality of submission and the morality of chivalry and generosity," wrote phi-

losopher John Stuart Mill in **The Subjection of Women** (Appleton, 1869; MIT, 1970, paper). "The time is ripe for morality of justice."

Mill's essays on the unhappy status of women went far beyond most feminist rhetoric of the day. Law was not the only villain, he contended; rather, the most basic relationships between men and women—e.g., within marriage and the family—cried out for overhaul. His was a decidedly "modern" view, anticipating such books as Simone de Beauvoir's **The Second Sex** (Knopf, 1953, cloth; Random, 1974, paper), and Kate Millett's **Sexual Politics** (Doubleday, 1970, cloth; 1971, paper).

Millett's book, widely acclaimed at the time, is wide-ranging, even diffuse. Drawing on Henry Miller, Sigmund Freud, and Nazi Germany, as well as on research in biology and psychology, Millett argued that sexual domination (by men of women) was "the most pervasive ideology of our culture."

She predicted, rightly, that issues of gender would have political implications; wrongly, that women would join blacks and students "in a growing radical coalition" to bring forth "a world we can bear out of the desert we inhabit."

Most modern feminist writings rest on the assumption that differences in male and female personality and behavior can be accounted for entirely by "social conditioning." Steven Goldberg disagrees. In **The Inevitability of Patriarchy** (Morrow, 1973, cloth & paper), he notes the "universality of male dominance" and concludes that this is the way Nature intended life to be.

"At the bottom of it all man's job is to protect woman and woman's job is to protect her infant." Feminists who say otherwise, Goldberg says, are "forever condemned to argue against their own juices."

Elizabeth Gould Davis presents a different view of matriarchy in **The First Sex** (Putnam's, 1971, cloth; Penguin, 1972, paper). She argues that, long before recorded history, there existed an advanced civilization populated only by women (who were capable of reproducing themselves). It was, she writes, "a golden age of queendoms, when peace and justice prevailed on earth."

Biologists, primatologists, and other serious scholars have advanced more tentative conclusions about men and women in prehistory. Zoologist Sarah Hrdy wrote **The Woman That Never Evolved** (Harvard, 1981) "to correct a bias within evolutionary biology"—namely, the notion that natural selection operated primarily on males, that it was the men who adapted while women remained passive spectators as the world around them changed. Hrdy makes a compelling case for the importance of female-female competition for men—the same kind of "trial-by-fire" intra-sex conflict that (in the conventional view) was so important to male evolution.

The eight contributors to **Woman the Gatherer** (Yale, 1981), edited by Frances Dahlberg, provide a useful modification of the dominant "man the hunter" view of early hominid society. Museum tableaus depicting hirsute males tracking saber-toothed tigers have elements of high drama, Dahlberg admits. But hunting, by itself, is not the stuff stable societies are made of. While the men were away, women sustained the rest of the community, securing protein

from catfish, termites, snails, gerbils. Not very heroic, Dahlberg says, "but what is lost in drama is gained in diversity and complexity."

Two other books provide a more comprehensive view of men and women over time and males and females of various species: David Barash's **The Whisperings Within** (Harper, 1979) and Donald Symons' **The Evolution of Human Sexuality** (Oxford, 1979).

Each of the four scholarly studies just mentioned above is written with *brio*. All of them are easily accessible to the general reader.

The best primer on the subject of sex generally is John Money's **Love and Love-Sickness** (Johns Hopkins, 1980, cloth & paper), which concisely and authoritatively covers everything from hormones to homosexuality to mathematical ability.

Two useful adjuncts are Richard Restak's **The Brain: The Last Frontier** (Doubleday, 1979, cloth; Warner, 1980, paper) and Eleanor E. Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin's **The Psychology of Sex Differences** (Stanford, 1974, cloth & paper). Maccoby and Jacklin reviewed the published research—more than 1,000 articles—and divided scholars' findings on sex differences into those that were undocumented (that girls are more "social"), those that were well-established (that boys are more "aggressive"), and those on which the jury was still out (almost everything else). The book's main flaw: It is nearly a decade out of date.

Where do men and women stand relative to one another in education, politics, the workplace? Ann Oakley's **Subject Women** (Pantheon, 1981, paper only) is a good place to look for answers. The book is balanced and comprehensive. Data come from both Britain and the

United States.

Jessie Bernard provides a more idiosyncratic view in **The Female World** (Macmillan, 1981). Bernard set out to look at women and *only* women: their friendships, the "sub-worlds of children and girls," literature and art, the "ethos" of the female world. It is a revealing work of "anthro"pology; perhaps the most revealing aspect of it is that Bernard cannot keep men out of the story.

It is a problem, the way men always seem to intrude. In her autobiographical **The Cinderella Complex** (Summit, 1981), Colette Dowling describes how she, a divorced mother of four, proudly and independently making her way in life, suddenly fell in love again and discovered the balm of dependence. Gradually Dowling abandoned her writing career in favor of "home-making—blissful homemaking" in Rhinebeck, N.Y.

Her liberated boyfriend was nonplused—"unhappy with what looked, increasingly, as if it might develop into a permanent inequity." He was, after all, paying the bills and supporting someone else's children.

Men, it seems, are often both surprised and confused. "There are still no clear, consistent cues from women as to what an appropriate, complementary male contribution is in many situations," as Eric Skjei and Richard Rabkin point out in **The Male Ordeal** (Putnam's, 1981).

Perhaps it is because women themselves do not always know. In 1963, Betty Friedan published **The Feminine Mystique** (Norton, 1963; 2nd ed., 1974, cloth; Dell, 1977, paper)—the call to arms of the modern middle-class women's movement.

Friedan described "the problem that has no name":

"As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—[the housewife] was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'"

Domesticity, Friedan wrote, had been glorified out of all proportion. Yes, it was often a source of satisfaction; yes, writing "Occupation: Housewife" on the census form was enough for some women. But others felt "incomplete."

Friedan warned that there was no "easy 'how-to' answer." She cautioned that getting "a job, any job" was not necessarily a solution. Husbands would, willy-nilly, have to be "sensitized." Girls would have to be brought up to expect more and strive for more. In ways that were not yet clear, the larger society would have to change.

Nearly two decades have passed. Writing in **The Second Stage** (Summit, 1981, cloth), Friedan looks back on what women have gained. A great deal, she believes. But, Friedan adds, "in our reaction against the feminine mystique . . . we sometimes seemed to fall into a *feminist* mystique which denied that core of woman's personhood that is fulfilled through love, nurture, home."

There is, Friedan contends, a new "problem that has no name": how to combine love, work, marriage, children—and freedom. It is a dilemma that makes "sexual war" self-defeating, Friedan believes, for it is one that can be resolved only if it is confronted by both sexes, together.