

PREFACE

Feminist theory, for the most part, assumes that our experience of history, even the history of our own lives, is constructed, is a story we tell ourselves, is ideological, and it assumes that ideologies are political, that they sustain or challenge relations of power. But if one function of feminist theory has been to critique stories which have been told about us and which have shaped our lives, the articles in this issue suggest that our reading of these stories is becoming more complex. In moving away from a simpler construction of ourselves as victims of male ideological domination we have come to see ourselves and our sisters in the past as writers of our own scripts whether those scripts have read as stories of restriction or as tales of liberation. In this issue, for example, Frances Jaffer's poem "Slope" suggests the inadequacy of old scripts, and Bell Chevigny asserts that in biographically recreating the lives of our foremothers we may be seeking indirectly to rescript and repair our own lives. Carol Ascher, meanwhile, in "Or a Short Story," reminds us that writing such tales of liberation is not an automatic consequence of becoming a feminist.

Tales of liberation, in fact, must themselves be scrutinized, must be read as particular historical events, or their political effects may be misconstrued. According to Kirsten Drotner, the shift from schoolgirl to air ace heroine in British magazines for girls, far from reflecting some liberating progress on the part of lower middle-class females, actually offered girls a way of escaping the reality of narrowed options and closing horizons. By the same token, stories which we have learned to read as simple vehicles for ideological domination may appear to operate more complexly when they are placed in the context of their readers' experience. Thus Janice Radway's study of the women who read *Harlequin* romances suggests that "romance reading may have some positive benefits and that even its conservative effects actually originate in significant discontent with the institutions the books purport to celebrate."

Women, of course, have also perpetuated or revised the larger stories which have shaped their lives. In his study of the courtship letters written by a Southern upper-class woman, Steven Stowe examines the way in which many women may have had to reconcile two conflicting ideologies of relationships. The first governed homosocial relations and made a girl's early relationships with women a model of intimacy and companionability. The second, an ideology of separate spheres, shaped heterosexual relations

and made a young woman's relation to her prospective husband a shocking contrast in distance and formality.

Early feminists revised or challenged restrictive ideologies like this, and yet they too were bound by elements of what they challenged. Ellen DuBois and Linda Gordon, for example, identify two separate traditions in nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist sexual thought which partially critiqued the way in which sexuality was constructed and which were in part determined by that very construction. One tradition was dominated by a social purity perspective that "addressed primarily the dangers" but saw "few of the possibilities of sex." The other, espoused by a small minority of sex radicals, celebrated adventurous heterosexuality, but "failed to offer a critique of the sexual experience available to most women." Both traditions held back from articulating a public ideology of sexuality which would have adequately named and defined the pleasures of homoeroticism that many women in both camps had explored in private.

Contemporary feminists have still not determined how to articulate a feminist sexual politics that simultaneously addresses the possibilities of female sexual pleasure and the realities of sexual danger, and the ideological splits which generated tension among early feminists are still being played out today. Indeed, no other issue seems to have stimulated more acrimony among feminist ranks. Women against Pornography denounce sexual libertarians who, they believe, sanction sexual styles founded on masculinist premises while critics of WAP accuse the anti-pornography movement of rehearsing a tired, Victorian separate spheres' ideology that, in their view, is as self-defeating for contemporary feminists as it was for their foremothers. As the controversy over the Barnard Conference indicates (see our notes and letters section), this split has often led to serious public acrimony and has opened the way to right-wing interventions against the feminist movement. Josephine Withers reflects on this growing intolerance in her art essay on the female nude in which she notes that some feminists have denounced as pornographic the works of women artists who are in fact trying to subvert the sexist tradition of the female nude by presenting nude self-portraits that are powerful and autonomous.

These ideological divisions within feminist ranks call attention to the need for continuing to maintain a critical perspective on the assumptions of the women's movement, assumptions which if unexamined may weaken our movement by dividing us from

each other. Phyllis Palmer, for example, calls attention to the frequent ethnocentrism of white feminist writings and to the disjunction “between white women’s embracing black women as images of strength and pathos” while “ignoring the realistic needs and interests of these same black women.” And in the same vein, Bonnie Thornton Dill rejects a concept of sisterhood which has been “based on unexamined assumptions about our similarities” and proposes that we embrace a more pluralistic theoretical perspective, one that accepts “the objective differences between women” and that makes connections “between different forms of structural inequality like sexism and racism more radically apparent.” Both suggest that if we began, as feminists, by challenging the stories which had been told about us and our sisters, then we must go on to examine the stories we have told about ourselves and perhaps to revise the ways in which we have constructed our own historical experience.

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