

**Uncertain,
Coy, and
Hard to Please**

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What with one thing and another, I have been doing a good deal of reading of Shakespeare lately* and I've noticed a great many things, including the following: Shakespeare's romantic heroines are usually much superior to his heroes in intelligence, character, and moral strength.

Juliet takes strenuous and dangerous action where Romeo merely throws himself on the ground and weeps (*Romeo and Juliet*); Portia plays a difficult and active role where Bassanio can only stand on the sidelines and wring his hands (*Merchant of Venice*); Benedick is a quick-witted fellow but he isn't a match for Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*). Nor is Biron a match for Rosaline (*Love's Labour's Lost*) or Orlando a match for Rosalind (*As You Like It*). In some cases, it isn't even close. Julia is infinitely superior in every way to Proteus (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*) and Helena to Bertram (*All's Well That Ends Well*).

The only play in which Shakespeare seems to fall prey to male chauvinism is *The Taming of the Shrew* and a good case can be made out for something more subtle than merely a strong man beating down a strong woman—but I won't bother you about that here.

* Because I'm writing a book on the subject, that's why.

Yet, despite all this, I never hear of anyone objecting to Shakespeare on the ground that he presents women inaccurately. I have never heard anyone say, "Shakespeare is all right but he doesn't understand women." On the contrary, I hear nothing but praise for his heroines.

How is it, then, that Shakespeare—who, by common consent, has caught the human race at its truest and most naked under the probing and impersonal light of his genius—tells us women are, if anything, the superior of men in all that counts, and yet so many of us nevertheless remain certain that women are inferior to men. I say "us" without qualification because women, by and large, accept their own inferiority.

You may wonder why this matter concerns me. Well, it concerns me (to put it most simply) because everything concerns me. It concerns me as a science-fiction writer, especially, because science fiction involves future societies, and these, I hope, will be more rational in their treatment of 51 per cent of the human race than our present society is.

It is my belief that future societies *will* be more rational in this respect, and I want to explain my reasons for this belief. I would like to speculate about Woman in the future, in the light of what has happened to Woman in the past and what is happening to Woman in the present.

To begin with, let's admit there are certain ineradicable physiological differences between men and women. (First one to yell "Vive la différence!" leaves the room.)

But are there any differences that are primarily nonphysiological? Are there intellectual, temperamental, emotional differences that you are *sure* of and that will serve to distinguish women from men in a broad, general way? I mean differences that will hold for all cultures, as the physiological differences do, and differences that are not the result of early training.

For instance, I am not impressed by the "Women are more refined" bit, since we all know that mothers begin very early in the

game to slap little hands and say, "No, no, no, nice little girls don't do that."

I, myself, take the rigid position that we can never be sure about cultural influences and that the only safe distinctions we can make between the sexes are the physiological ones. Of these, I recognize two:

1. Most men are physically larger and physically stronger than most women.
2. Women get pregnant, bear babies, and suckle them. Men don't.

What can we deduce from these two differences *alone*? It seems to me that this is enough to put women at a clear disadvantage with respect to men in a primitive hunting society, which is all there was prior to, say, 10,000 B.C.

Women, after all, would be not quite as capable at the rougher aspects of hunting and would be further handicapped by a certain ungainliness during pregnancy and certain distractions while taking care of infants. In a catch-as-catch-can jostle for food, she would come up at the rear every time.

It would be convenient for a woman to have some man see to it that she was thrown a haunch after the hunting was over and then see to it, further, that some other man didn't take it away from her. A primitive hunter would scarcely do this out of humanitarian philosophy; he would have to be bribed into it. I suppose you're all ahead of me in guessing that the obvious bribe is sex.

I visualize a Stone Age treaty of mutual assistance between Man and Woman—sex for food—and as a result of this kind of togetherness, children are reared and the generations continue.*

* After this article appeared, an anthropologist named Charlotte O. Kursh wrote me a long and fascinating letter that made it quite clear that I had dreadfully oversimplified the situation described here, that hunting was not the only food-source, and that questions of status were even more important than sex. Once one substituted "status-for-food" for "sex-for-food" she found she tended to agree with what followed. So, with this warning to take my anthropology with a grain of salt, let's continue.

I don't see that any of the nobler passions can possibly have had anything to do with this. I doubt that anything we would recognize as "love" was present in the Stone Age, for romantic love seems to have been a rather late invention and to be anything but widespread even today. (I once read that the Hollywood notion of romantic love was invented by the medieval Arabs and was spread to our own Western society by the Provençal troubadours.)

As for the concern of a father for his children, forget it. There seem definite indications that men did not really understand the connection between sexual intercourse and children until nearly historic times. Mother love may have its basis in physiology (the pleasure of suckling, for instance) but I strongly suspect that father love, however real it may be, is cultural in origin.

Although the arrangement of sex for food seems a pretty reasonable *quid pro quo*, it isn't. It is a terribly unfair arrangement because one side can break the agreement with impunity and the other cannot. If a woman punishes by withholding sex and a man by withholding food, which side will win out? *Lysistrata* to the contrary, a week without sex is a lot easier than a week without food. Furthermore, a man who tires of this mutual strike can take what he wants by force; a woman can't.

It seems to me, then, that for definite physiological reasons, the original association of men and women was a strictly unequal one, with man in the role of master and woman in the role of slave.

This is not to say that a clever woman, even in Stone Age times, might not have managed to wheedle and cajole a man into letting her have her own way. And we all know that this is certainly true nowadays, but wheedling and cajolery are slave weapons. If you, Proud Reader, are a man and don't see this, I would suggest you try to wheedle and cajole your boss into giving you a raise, or wheedle and cajole a friend into letting you have your way, and see what happens to your self-respect.

In any master-slave relationship, the master does only that portion of the work that he likes to do or that the slave cannot do; all else is reserved for the slave. It is indeed frozen into the slaves' duties not only by custom but by stern social law which defines slaves' work as unfit for free men to do.

Suppose we divide work into "big-muscle" and "little-muscle." Men would do the "big-muscle" work because he would have to and the women would then do the "little-muscle" work. Let's face it; this is usually (not always) a good deal for men because there is far more "little-muscle" work to do. ("Men work from sun to sun; women's work is never done," the old saying goes.)

Sometimes, in fact, there is no "big-muscle" work to do at all. In that case the Indian brave sits around and watches the squaw work—a situation that is true for many non-Indian braves who sit and watch their non-Indian squaws work.* Their excuse is, of course, that as proud and gorgeous males they can scarcely be expected to do "women's work."

The social apparatus of man-master and woman-slave was carried right into the most admired cultures of antiquity and was never questioned there. To the Athenians of the Golden Age, women were inferior creatures, only dubiously superior to domestic animals, and with nothing in the way of human rights. To the cultivated Athenian, it seemed virtually self-evident that male homosexuality was the highest form of love, since that was the only way in which a human being (male, that is) could love an equal. Of course, if he wanted children, he had to turn to a woman, but so what; if he wanted transportation, he turned to his horse.

As for that other great culture of the past, the Hebrew, it is quite obvious that the Bible accepts male superiority as a matter of course. It is not even a subject for discussion at any point.

In fact, by introducing the story of Adam and Eve, it has done more for woman's misery than any other book in history. The tale has enabled dozens of generations of men to blame everything on

* Of course, if they are too chivalrous to watch a woman do all the work, they can always close their eyes. That will even give them a chance to sleep.

women. It has made it possible for a great many holy men of the past to speak of women in terms that a miserable sinner like myself would hesitate to use in referring to mad dogs.

In the ten commandments themselves, women are casually lumped with other forms of property, animate and inanimate. It says, in Exodus 20:17: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's."

Nor is the New Testament any better. There are a number of quotations I can choose from, but I will give you this one from Ephesians 5:22-24: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing."

This seems to me to aspire to a change in the social arrangement of man/woman from master/slave to God/creature.

I don't deny that there are many passages in both the Old and New Testaments that praise and dignify womankind. (For example, there is the Book of Ruth.) The trouble is, though, that in the social history of our species, those passages of the Bible which taught feminine wickedness and inferiority were by far the more influential. To the self-interest that led men to tighten the chains about women was added the most formidable of religious injunctions.

The situation has not utterly changed in its essence, even now. Women have attained a certain equality before the law—but only in our own century, even here in the United States. Think how shameful it is that no woman, however intelligent and educated, could vote in a national election until 1920—despite the fact that the vote was freely granted to every drunkard and moron, provided only that he happened to be male.

Yet even so—though women can vote, and hold property, and even own their own bodies—all the social apparatus of inferiority remains.

Any man can tell you that a woman is intuitive rather than logical, emotional rather than reasonable, finicky rather than creative, refined rather than vigorous. They don't understand politics, can't add a column of figures, drive cars poorly, shriek with terror at mice, and so on and so on and so on.

Because women are all these things how can they be allowed an equal share with men in the important tasks of running industry, government, society?

Such an attitude is self-fulfilling, too.

We begin by teaching a young man that he is superior to young women, and this is comforting for him. He is automatically in the top half of the human race, whatever his shortcomings may be. Anything that tends to disturb this notion threatens not only his personal self-respect but his very virility.

This means that if a woman happens to be more intelligent than a particular man in whom she is (for some arcane reason) interested, she must never, for her very life, reveal the fact. No sexual attraction can then overcome the mortal injury he receives in the very seat and core of his masculine pride, and she loses him.

On the other hand, there is something infinitely relieving to a man in the sight of a woman who is, manifestly, inferior to himself. It is for that reason that a silly woman seems "cute." The more pronouncedly male-chauvinistic a society the more highly valued is silliness in a woman.

Through long centuries, women have had to interest men somehow, if they were to achieve any economic security and social status at all, and so those who were not stupid and silly by nature had to carefully cultivate such stupidity and silliness until it came natural and they forgot they ever were intelligent.

It is my feeling that all the emotional and temperamental distinctions between men and women are of cultural origin, and that

they serve the important function of maintaining the man/woman master/slave arrangement.

It seems to me that any clear look at social history shows this—and shows, moreover, that the feminine “temperament” jumps through hoops whenever that is necessary to suit man’s convenience.

What was ever more feminine than Victorian womanhood, with its delicacy and modesty, its blushes and catchings of breath, its incredible refinement and its constant need for the smelling salts to overcome a deplorable tendency to faint? Was there ever a sillier toy than the stereotype of the Victorian woman; was there ever a greater insult to the dignity of *Homo sapiens*?

But you can see why the Victorian woman (or a rough approximation of her) had to exist in the late nineteenth century. It was a time when among the upper classes, there was no “little-muscle” work for her to do since servants did it. The alternative was to let her use her spare time in joining men in their work, or to have her do nothing. Firmly, men had her do nothing (except for such make-work nothings as embroidery and hack piano-playing). Women were even encouraged to wear clothes that hampered their physical movements to the point where they could scarcely walk or breathe.

What was left to them, then, but a kind of ferocious boredom that brought out the worst aspects of the human temperament, and made them so unfit an object even for sex, that they were carefully taught that sex was dirty and evil so that their husbands could go elsewhere for their pleasures.

But in this very same era, no one ever thought of applying the same toy-dog characteristics to the women of the lower classes. There was plenty of “little-muscle” work for them to do and since they had no time for fainting and refinement, the feminine temperament made the necessary adjustment and they did without either fainting or refinement.

The pioneer women of the American West not only cleaned

house, cooked, and bore baby after baby, but they grabbed up rifles to fight off Indians when necessary. I strongly suspect they were also hitched to the plow on such occasions as the horse needed a rest, or the tractor was being polished. And this was in Victorian times.

We see it all about us even now. It's an article of faith that women just aren't any good at even the simplest arithmetic. You know how those cute little dears can't balance a checkbook. When I was a kid, all bank tellers were male for that very reason. But then it got hard to hire male bank tellers. Now 90 per cent of them are female and apparently they can add up figures and balance checkbooks after all.

There was a time all nurses were males because everyone knew that women were simply too delicate and refined for such work. When the economic necessities made it important to hire females as nurses, it turned out they weren't all that delicate and refined after all. (Now nursing is "woman's work" that a proud man wouldn't do.)

Doctors and engineers are almost always men—until some sort of social or economic crunch comes—and then the female temperament makes the necessary change and, as in the Soviet Union, women become doctors and engineers in great numbers.

What it amounts to is best expressed in a well-known verse by Sir Walter Scott:

*O woman! in our hours of ease,
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,*

...

*When pain and anguish wring the brow,
A ministering angel thou!*

Most women seem to think this is a very touching and wonderful tribute to them, but I think that it is a rather bald exhibition of the fact that when man is relaxing he wants a toy and when he

is in trouble he wants a slave and woman is on instant call for either role.

What if pain and anguish wring *her* brow? Who's *her* ministering angel? Why, another woman who is hired for the occasion.

But let's not slip to the other extreme either. During the fight for women's votes, the male chauvinists said that this would wreck the nation since women had no feeling for politics and would merely be manipulated by their menfolks (or by their priests, or by any political quack with a scalpful of curls and a mouthful of teeth).

Feminists, on the other hand, said that when women brought their gentleness and refinement and honesty to the polling booth, all graft, corruption, and war would be brought to an end.

You know what happened when women got the vote? *Nothing*. It turned out that women were no stupider than men—and no wiser, either.

What of the future? Will women gain true equality?

Not if basic conditions continue as they have ever since *Homo sapiens* became a species. Men won't voluntarily give up their advantage. Masters never do. Sometimes they are forced to do so by violent revolution of one sort or another. Sometimes they are forced to do so by their wise foresight of a coming violent revolution.

An *individual* may give up an advantage out of a mere sense of decency, but such are always in the minority and a group as a whole never does.

Indeed, in the present case, the strongest proponents of the status quo are the women themselves (at least most of them). They have played the role so long they would feel chills about the wrists and ankles if the chains were struck off. And they have grown so used to the petty rewards (the tipped hat, the offered elbow, the smirk and leer, and, most of all, the freedom to be silly) that they won't exchange them for freedom. Who is

hardest on the independent-minded woman who defies the slave-conventions? Other women, of course, playing the fink on behalf of men.

Yet things will change even so, because the basic conditions that underlie woman's historic position are changing.

What was the first essential difference between men and women?

1. Most men are physically larger and physically stronger than most women.

So? What of that today. Rape is a crime and so is physical mayhem even when only directed against women. That doesn't stop such practices altogether, but it does keep them from being the universal masculine game they once were.

And does it matter that men are larger and stronger, in the economic sense? Is a woman too small and weak to earn a living? Does she have to crawl into the protecting neck-clutch of a male, however stupid or distasteful he may be, for the equivalent of the haunch of the kill?

Nonsense! "Big-muscle" jobs are steadily disappearing and only "little-muscle" jobs are left. We don't dig ditches any more, we push buttons and let machines dig ditches. The world is being computerized and there is nothing a man can do in the way of pushing paper, sorting cards, and twiddling contacts, that a woman can't do just as well.

In fact, littleness may be at a premium. Smaller and slenderer fingers may be just what is wanted.

More and more, women will learn they need only offer sex for sex and love for love, and nevermore sex for food. I can think of nothing that will dignify sex more than this change, or more quickly do away with the degrading master/slave existence of "the double standard."

But how about the second difference:

2. Women get pregnant, bear babies, and suckle them. Men don't.

I frequently hear tell that women have a "nest-building" instinct, that they really *want* to take care of a man and immolate themselves for his sake. Maybe so, under conditions as they used to be. But how about now?

With the population explosion becoming more and more of a cliff-hanger for all mankind, we will, before the end of the century, have evolved a new attitude toward babies or our culture will die.

It will become perfectly all right for a woman not to have babies. The stifling social pressure to become a "wife and mother" will lift and that will mean even more than the lifting of the economic pressure. Thanks to the pill, the burden of babies can be lifted without the abandonment of sex.

This doesn't mean women *won't* have babies; it means merely they won't *have* to have babies.

In fact, I feel that female slavery and the population explosion go hand in hand. Keep a woman in subjection and the only way a man will feel safe is to keep her "barefoot and pregnant." If she has nothing to do except undignified and repetitive labor, a woman will want baby after baby as the only escape to something else.

On the other hand, make women truly free and the population explosion will stop of its own accord. Few women would want to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of numerous babies. And don't say "No" too quickly; feminine freedom has never been truly tried, but it must be significant that the birth rate is highest where the social position of women is lowest.

In the twenty-first century, then, I predict that women will be completely free for the first time in the history of the species.

Nor am I afraid of the counter-prediction that all things go in cycles and that the clearly visible trend toward feminine emancipation will give way to a swing back to a kind of neo-Victorianism.

Effects can be cyclic, yes—but only if causes are cyclic, and the

basic causes here are non-cyclic, barring world-wide thermonuclear war.

In order for the pendulum to swing back toward feminine slavery, there would have to be an increase in "big-muscle jobs" that only men could do. Women must begin once more to fear starvation without a man to work for them. Well, do you think the present trend toward computerization and social security will reverse itself short of global catastrophe? Honestly?

In order for the pendulum to swing back, there would have to be a continuation of the desire for large families and lots of children. There's no other way of keeping women contented with her slavery on a large scale (or too busy to think about it, which amounts to the same thing). Given our present population explosion and the situation as it will be by 2000, do you honestly expect women to be put to work breeding baby after baby?

So the trend toward woman's freedom is irreversible.

There's the beginning of it right now and it is well established. Do you think that the present era of increasing sexual permissiveness (almost everywhere in the world) is just a temporary breakdown in our moral fiber and that a little government action will restore the stern virtues of our ancestors?

Don't you believe it. Sex has been divorced from babies, and it will continue to be so, since sex can't possibly be suppressed and babies can't possibly be encouraged. Vote for whom you please but the "sexual revolution" will continue.

Or take even something so apparently trivial as the new fad of hairiness in man. (I've just grown a pair of absolutely magnificent sideburns myself.) Sure, it will change in details, but what it really stands for is the breakdown of trivial distinctions between the sexes.

It is indeed this which disturbs the conventional. Over and over, I hear them complain that some particular long-haired boy looks just like a girl. And then they say, "You can't tell them apart any more!"

This always makes me wonder why it is so important to tell a boy from a girl at a glance, unless one has some personal object in view where the sex makes a difference. You can't tell at a glance whether a particular person is Catholic, Protestant, or Jew; whether he/she is a piano player or a poker player, an engineer or an artist, intelligent or stupid.

After all, if it were *really* important to tell the sexes apart at the distance of several blocks with one quick glance, why not make use of Nature's distinction? That is *not* long hair since both sexes in all cultures grow hair of approximately equal length. On the other hand, men always have more facial hair than women; the difference is sometimes extreme. (My wife, poor thing, couldn't grow sideburns even if she tried.)

Well, then, should all men grow beards? Yet the very same conventional people who object to long hair on a man, also object to beards. *Any* change unsettles them, so when change becomes necessary, conventional people must be ignored.

But *why* this fetish of short hair for men and long hair for women, or, for that matter, pants for men and skirts for women, shirts for men and blouses for women? Why a set of artificial distinctions to exaggerate the natural ones? Why the sense of disturbance when the distinctions are blurred?

Can it be that the loud and gaudy distinction of dress and hair between the two sexes is another sign of the master-slave relationship? No master wants to be mistaken for a slave at any distance, or have a slave mistaken for a master, either. In slave societies, slaves are always carefully distinguished (by a pigtail when the Manchus ruled China, by a yellow Star of David when the Nazis ruled Germany, and so on). We ourselves tend to forget this since our most conspicuous non-female slaves had a distinctive skin color and required very little else to mark them.

In the society of sexual equality that is coming, then, there will be a blurring of artificial distinctions between the sexes, a blurring that is already on the way. But so what? A particular boy will

know who his particular girl is and vice versa, and if someone else is not part of the relationship what does he/she care which is which?

I say we can't beat the trend and we should therefore join it. I say it may even be the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to mankind.

I think the Greeks *were* right in a way and that it is much better to love an equal. And if that be so, why not hasten the time when we heterosexuals can have love at its best?

