

Summary

Femininity as a Source of Socio-cultural Anxieties

Crystallizations and Dispersions

The book *Femininity as a Source of Socio-cultural Anxieties. Crystallizations and Dispersions* constitutes an attempt to analyse the various representations of femininity that have emerged over the centuries and which are perceived by many authors as symbols, archetypes, myths and icons. By interpreting iconographic material and literary, medical, religious and philosophical texts, I sought to present selected constructs of femininity. This was an attempt to capture the ambivalence and contradictions, the meanings in flux and meandering symbolism characteristic of how they appear in Western culture.

Stories do not exist in an immutable form, but become something of a reflection, a lens for the anxieties and constructs of femininity in a given epoch. They are subject to unceasing transformation, in essence, crystallizing and dispersing in numerous, often contradictory interpretations. It is, of course, possible to analyse this in the context of knowledge of the particular epoch in which they emerged. Their universality, and in fact the universality of anxieties they that stir up, cause them to persist, and every period of history (and the many discourses within them) inscribe different meanings in them, which are not intended in the source text.

The book has three parts. The first is devoted to classical figures: Ophelia, Salome and the Lady of Shalott, and here I attempted to show how the anxieties around femininity, and in particular, the fear of women's emancipation and female power, crystallized into constructions leading to their sexuality and otherness being designed. In this way, new representations of femininity emerged: imprisoned in symbolic patriarchal tower (Lady of Shalott), a *femme fatale* leading men to their doom (Salome) and a woman consumed by madness (Ophelia). These were an expression of prevailing convictions on the nature of womanhood (and consequently their roles) in a given period of history. I also focus on the way changes in the social position of women in the second half of the 19th century (these representations appeared most fully at that time), connected with their aspira-

tions for equal rights, contributed to growing (male) anxiety and, as a consequence, the demonisation of these women's traits as being contrary to traditional femininity. The three representations above are the consequence of calling into question the ideal of a woman as subservient, passive and dependent on men. Its place was taken by the woman who wished to decide about herself and her sexuality, and who even sought power. Seen from this perspective, the images of women that I refer to on artists' canvasses are not a simple reflection of reality, but present the dreams, anxieties and impressions of their male painters (and of millions of other men). These are without doubt steeped in a particular epoch's ideologies concerning the sexes.

In the part dealing with the fairy tale characters Cinderella, the Snow Queen and Little Red Riding Hood, I interpret the meanings inscribed in these heroines, both in the past and now. The available interpretations are incredibly diverse. Jack Zipes emphasises the liberating magic of fairy stories (referring to the classical and sexual contexts), while Cristina Bacchilega draws attention to the fact that each fairy tale refers to particular social norms and values, and leads to their reinforcement. There can be no doubt that fairy tales are a reflection of various ideologies. We should note that, as the German historian and anthropologist August Nitschke states, depending on the historical epoch or socio-cultural context, the same tale can act as a confirmation of an ideology or articulate a desire to change it. Feminist discourse, on the other hand, emphasises the need to understand the sources of power (usually male) that can be found in fairy tales, followed by its reinterpretation, which points to their fictional character with little in common with reality.

I have selected three characters which, to my mind, are the most popular fairy story characters and which appeal to the mass imagination. At the same time, they constitute a crystallization of femininity-related anxieties. The Snow Queen is a reflection of male fantasies on the female ideal: passive, infantile, innocent and subservient, she becomes a crystallization of female nature. Little Red Riding Hood is a story depicting the danger lying in wait for women who stray from the path of virtue. It alludes to the ideal of a moral, modest woman resistant to temptation of seduction. Cinderella, on the other hand, embodies the promise of a change in fortunes, thanks to the prince and her exceptional beauty, modesty and diligence.

Part Three is devoted to the symbols of femininity, which have been imbued with conflicting meanings. Red lipstick, high heels and a corset were perceived as sexual symbols of women's subjugation and oppression. However, an analysis of the literature and popular discourse clearly reveals that red lipstick, high heels and a corset are treated by many women as symbolising empowerment, freedom and control, even dominance over men.

Translated by Rob Pagett