

12. All Things Being Equal: Phyllis Chesler's superiority

Phyllis Chesler was to psychology, psychiatry and the medical establishment very much what Ann Oakley was to sociology (and the medical establishment), and again we have an in-depth analysis of a particular male institution and the damage that is done to women in its 'value-free' name. In *Women and Madness* (1972), Phyllis Chesler insisted that the rot had gone too far for there to be any hope of reforming the theories and practices associated with mental health. What was necessary, she argued, was a completely new way of describing and explaining mental health which was free from male politics, for in the hands of men the method had become nothing other than a blatant instrument of oppression used against women. Far from being designed to help women, she declared, psychiatry and the clinicians who practised it constituted a means of punishing women.

Women and Madness was no appeal to men to reform, but a call to women to make men reform as a matter of the greatest urgency. Phyllis Chesler was angry and it shows. She makes other women angry, which was her intention. Hers is an energising statement, partly because it presumes women as the audience and men as the target for criticism. She is no clinician hoping to be read by the psychiatric establishment, and bent on achieving recognition or respectability, but an 'insider' who is prepared to come out and tell the full story. It is a shocking story in which the shock is intensified by the stark realism of Phyllis Chesler's style. Again and again the most horrific evidence is presented in the most matter-of-fact tone, which serves to reinforce her argument that it is not the occasional exception she is describing and explaining, but the everyday practices, the routine details of the treatment of women in a male-dominated society and under a male-dominated institution.

The most fundamental and dramatic issue that Phyllis Chesler raised in *Women and Madness* was that, by definition, women are made, and this ensures their vulnerability as victims of the mental health weapon. She got straight to the crux of the belief-system which created a double-standard of mental health in the interest of men and male power. What society held to be a mentally sick man, she explained - someone who was dependent, passive, lacking in initiative and in need of support - was precisely the same as what society held to be a healthy woman, and vice versa. A sick woman was one who displayed some of the prized characteristics of the healthy male - self-reliance, confidence, independence. The superb convenience of this arrangement which allowed men to monopolise these human characteristics and to punish women who showed signs of possessing them was not lost on Phyllis Chesler who, in bald terms, exposed the blatant politics of mental health, and revealed how in a patriarchal society it is used to control and oppress women.

The values and belief-system of psychiatrists, she states, are very important, for 'Psychiatrists both medically and legally, decide who is insane and why, what should be done to or for such people; and when and if they should be released from treatment' (p.59). This is an enormous power to have over other human beings: an unaccountable power. It is power concentrated in the hands of a white, male elite and is used for the purpose of preserving that power and defending and explaining that elitism. It leads, according to Phyllis Chesler, to the edge of male reality in which male is the norm and woman is other, is deviant - is mad. Phyllis Chesler regards it as no coincidence that a patriarchal society has prided itself on *rationality* and claimed the realm of the irrational as the prerogative of men. It is then 'rational' to allocate the woman as mad, patriarchal society has one more means of placing women outside the cultural mainstream where the actions of women become inexplicable by rational, male standards. (p.32)

There is another example of men creating the meanings and the knowledge which structure the inferiority of women and help to justify the different treatment that women receive when male is the norm. The whole edifice is a cultural construction which originates in a male supremacist value-system and which has awful consequences for women. For what Phyllis Chesler is making clear is that *madness applies to all women*. One of her most startling findings is how little difference

there is between women who constitute 'the problem' and women who are used as the 'control group' in any study of women's mental disability (p.96). In the context of male meanings, all women are defined as mad, or beyond normal explanations - when normality equals male - and women are required to be different: the ones who are directly penalised are arbitrary victims.

This is not new, says Phyllis Chesler which she demonstrates before Mary Daly's (1978) analysis of witch-hunting by drawing parallels between the creation and treatment of witches in the past with the creation and treatment of mental illness in women in the present. In both cases woman was defined as suspect, as potentially a witch or mentally disturbed, and the ones who were singled out for treatment were unfortunate enough to attract notice and to warrant punishment. This is not the only feature the two have in common, she continues, extending the parallel: those who persecuted witches and those who practise psychiatry treat woman as a category in very much the same way - the major difference lying in the technology - for the purpose and the barbarism are still there today, but drugs and electric shock treatment have replaced witch-pricking and ducking-stools as a means of maintaining male control over females. The threat of punishment applies to all women and serves as intimidation and is quite sufficient to keep many women in their place.

More and more women are seeking psychiatric help, states Phyllis Chesler, and she tries to analyse some of the reasons for this development. It could be that increasing numbers of women are becoming 'difficult' and are in need of care, but she is quick to point out that while women are used by psychiatry, they are also in a position to use it. Madness, she says, can be a break from the many exhausting if not impossible demands of the female role. It can also be a definite protest, for women find it easier and much more in character to become depressed, rather than to engage in physical violence. The whole model of psychiatric help is 'in character' for women - one might even say it was designed for them - for while women are conditioned to find solutions in dependency then even greater dependence and self-abnegation can appear to be a plausible solution. There is also the distinct possibility that things are getting worse for women, states Phyllis Chesler, as more and more women find themselves 'out of work' when their children - or their husband - leave. Redundancy can well lead to depression, and she notes that 'Many newly useless women are

emerging more publicly into insanity' (p.33). In terms of women's reality there could be good reason to be depressed; this could be a completely rational response to an untenable and seemingly unchangeable situation.

There are difficulties with the term *madness* for it is a general term and not sufficiently precise to distinguish between the range of behaviours it encompasses. There is the madness that men use against women, and the madness which is the other side of the coin – women's resistance to male power. That one of the most common indices of madness among women is to refuse to make themselves attractive or to do housework or other 'slave' tasks, certainly raises the question of whether women are on strike. This is a question which has also been raised in relation to the more recent epidemic of agoraphobia among women which effectively prevents them from fulfilling their service functions outside the home. If this does represent a strike on women's behalf and a demand for a fairer deal, it is a desperately high price to pay. Phyllis Chesler makes it clear that, while she acknowledges some of the constructs that create and coerce women's madness, as a form of resistance madness does not constitute a revolutionary force. 'It has never been my intention to romanticize madness or to confuse it with political or cultural revolution,' she states, partly because there is just too much pain involved in it. 'Most weeping, depressed women, most anxious and terrified women are neither about to seize the means of production and reproduction, nor are they more creatively involved with problems of cosmic powerlessness, evil and love than is the rest of the human race' (p.xxii).

Psychiatry, however, is held up as one of the products of a civilised society. It is the latest in scientific achievement applied to human understanding and, ostensibly, it holds out hope for mental disturbance for which in previous times there has been no cure. But to Phyllis Chesler this rationale is 'window dressing', for in her terms this is the institution which ranks among the most damaging for women and, for her, there is no mystery why it works this way, or how it came to be this way. Like every other feminist whose ideas have been discussed, she assigns much of the responsibility to Freud who set up a paradigm for treating women's reality – particularly of sexual abuse – as fantasy, finding it much more expedient to blame women than to cast a critical eye on male dominance, violence and sexual exploitation.¹ But there was no shortage of men to continue and expand the trade that Freud had

started: as has been stated in earlier chapters his theory was timely, and eminently suited to control women in a period when they were beginning to enjoy more educational, occupational and financial freedoms.

It wasn't as if this 'new' treatment of women represented a radical departure from the traditions of a male-dominated society. As Phyllis Chesler points out, our history is replete with references to women who have been locked up (see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1980; in 1861 Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had asked their own questions: 'Could the dark secrets of those insane asylums be brought to light', wrote Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *History of Woman Suffrage*, 'we would be shocked to know the countless number of rebellious wives, sisters and daughters that are thus annually sacrificed to false customs and conventionalisms, and barbarous laws made by men for women' (1881, Vol.1, p.469). Freud, and the clinicians who followed, simply refined the practices and developed more sophisticated means of putting women in their place – literally and metaphorically.

Some of the insights presented by Phyllis Chesler, however, have little relevance outside the United States, because the majority of the world's population of women, no matter what their problems, have no access to the male clinician who will define their reality for them, provide their meanings, encourage their adjustment and offer a personal solution based on the presumption of their own inadequacies, rather than those of society. But her thesis that mental health is a modern weapon used against women extends far beyond the confines of the United States. Phyllis Chesler constructs a principle which makes it possible for women to reorganise the evidence, to see some of the past and present brutality, which men have been prepared to perpetrate to preserve their dominion over women. This is part of the rule of force that Kate Millet refers to, and without which patriarchy would be inoperable as a system.

Identifying this principle and its systematic nature, recognising the brutality that it facilitates and acknowledging the culpability of all men, Phyllis Chesler paved the way for future theses which adopted and extended this framework. Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1976) and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) both make the distinction between the capacities of all men and all women, and both analyse male dominance and violence against women within the tradition that

Phyllis Chesler helped to found.

This is not the only area where Phyllis Chesler lays some of the groundwork. *Women and Madness* also contains one of the first serious and non-pejorative assessments of women's sexuality and lesbianism. Explaining why male homosexuality has been far more visible than lesbianism she attributes this directly to the enhanced male image and states that a more 'glorious' tradition has been constructed for it: 'Historically . . . many male homosexuals have waged "heroic" wars together, have headed governments, churches and industries, and created artistic and intellectual masterpieces' (p. 174). Women, however, have a very different tradition: 'Lesbians do not have a gloriously extensive ancestry', she writes. 'Their mothers and grandmothers, like those of heterosexual women, lived with men and did not control the means of production. Lesbians are women: as such, most are traditionally more domestic, conventional and sexually monogamous than male homosexuals are - traits to which women are condemned, but for which they are not really valued' (p. 175). If male homosexuality is more a part of society's reality, then this is simply a statement about which sex is valued, and it is a meaning which she turns back on male homosexuality.

I must suggest that male homosexuality, in patriarchal society, is a basic and extreme expression of phallus worship, misogyny, and the colonization of certain female and/or 'feminine' functions. Male homosexuals, like male heterosexuals (and like heterosexual women), prefer men to women. It is as simple as that. (p. 177)

Things are very different for women:

In a sense, it is theoretically easier for women to love women than it is for men to love men. Our mothers were women and, Michelangelo aside, most object-models of sexual or aesthetic beauty in our culture are female. Also most women know how to be tender (not that they always are) with other people. Traditionally, most men, whether they are homosexual or heterosexual, know only seduction, rape and pillage - in bed and on the battlefield. (p. 176)

In these circumstances, lesbianism is an eminently sensible and understandable choice.¹ And Phyllis Chesler links lesbianism with a passionate plea for a real sisterhood, with the revolutionary aim for

women to love and care for each other. It is her belief that women from birth are channelled into being nurturers and are themselves deprived of nurturance: one remedy for this is for women to nurture each other - an aim that is not always realised, even among feminists. But it is an aim that Phyllis Chesler would definitely like to see achieved, partly because of its revolutionary nature. When women's reference group is women (as is the case with *Women and Madness*), when women seek approval from each other and bypass the approval of men, much will have changed, for male centrality will have been undermined. This is another variation on Germaine Greer's theme of women taking back their resources which are within their power to reclaim.

Despite her idealised version of sisterhood, Phyllis Chesler does not idealise women's oppression. She raises an issue which I have only encountered in specific form once before.² During the nineteenth century it was not uncommon for feminists to insist on women's moral superiority and to imply that in their oppressed state women learnt a great deal that was valuable - compassion and nurturance, even spiritual values. To George Eliot this looked like dangerous ground indeed: if oppression produced noble souls, she argued, it was a good case for more oppression, not for ending it. Phyllis Chesler adopts a very similar line of reasoning: we have to be very careful of the claims we make for women in our oppressed state, she warns.

Obviously there is a fine line to tread. Phyllis Chesler makes it quite clear that men have power, but so too do women. It is not accurate, she states, to portray men as all-powerful and women as pathetic; even to move in this direction is to undermine the power that women do have, and to paralyse and pre-empt action among women. Nor is it accurate or helpful, she insists, to present a romanticised view of oppression which produces those warm and wonderful creatures - women. One example that she uses in this context is that of women's pacifism, a claim that is often made for women. If women are pacifists, she states, it is partly because violence is not a choice for them. If physical force was an option open to women but they elected not to use it, then we could hold up women's pacifism as a virtue. But while violence is not an option for women, 'Women are no more to be congratulated on their "pacifism" than men are to be congratulated for their "violence"' (p. 259).

Myths about women that are not useful to women are a constant target for elimination in Phyllis Chesler's book. (Myths that are useful are quite another thing - she is in the business of creating them, for it is

not myths she is against, quite the contrary: it is the male meanings which she seeks to end. Her defiant stance of exposing the utilitarian value of myths in a patriarchal society was one that she continued in her later book with Emily Jane Goodman, *Women, Money and Power* (1976). In the light of all the evidence today on women's poverty, it is difficult to remember the time when it was widely believed that women were secretly wealthy. But that was a myth that Phyllis Chesler helped to eliminate and, in doing so, she pointed in the direction of women's poverty.

Phyllis Chesler's attitude to men is also elaborated in a later book, *About Men* (1978) – but the basic meanings are all there in uncompromising fashion in *Women and Madness*. She classifies all men together as a social category and does not take males and male norms as her reference point – they have no redeeming features in her analysis. Nor is she writing for men or male approval. That all men are not equal is patently clear to Phyllis Chesler and she points out that less powerful men are required to perform male rites of violence – 'Old, wealthy, white American men have not been dying in Vietnam' (p.271). Yet she is adamant that women do not exist for the purpose of looking after men: women have to begin to exist for themselves and to cease assuming responsibility for what men do to each other.

Her assessment of the way men will try to take over the topic of women's liberation and use it in their own interest is shrewd indeed, and she cites the way male clinicians can set out to discredit and destroy women's new-found (and to them threatening) reality, in order to preserve their own reality and, of course, their own dominance. Writing about how men take women's meanings out of sexual harassment, she states:

Clinicians seem to dislike and pity the paranoia and anger of the feminists. . . . Slyly, confidently, they want to know why they are so 'nervous' about being found sexually attractive by 'poor' Tom, Dick or Harry. Why are they so angry at verbal abuse in the streets? . . . Don't these suddenly complaining women 'unconsciously' invite harassment or rape, and don't they 'unconsciously' enjoy it? (pp.228-9)

After the 'softening up' comes the takeover bid. Furthermore, isn't the point of women's liberation the liberation of men too, and not, heaven forbid, female power? Isn't capitalism the real enemy and feminism

divisive and/or the 'jousting' of spoiled, white, middle-class women' (p.229). This isn't new, of course, but these are the men who can the men living on the basis that they can solve women's problems; they are the men, Phyllis Chesler comments wryly, who are more concerned to talk about how sexism hurts men more than it hurts women (p.230). Even those who profess sympathy frequently do so because they are sexually 'attracted' to feminists, whom they see as more 'interesting' and 'sexually promiscuous' than their wives' (p.228).

No matter in what form women raise the topic, there is a tactic available to men which helps to take the threat out of it, and works to consign the topic – and women – to the realm of not-to-be-taken-seriously. This by no means surprises Phyllis Chesler, who sees power very much in terms of survival, and who regards the very concept of female power as a potent challenge to male survival, and she takes a remarkable but none the less reasonable stand on what women's aspirations should be. Equality is a spurious goal, and of no use to women: the only way women can protect themselves is if they dominate particular institutions and can use them to serve women's interests. Reproduction is a case in point. She also speculates on the realisation of equality and gives implicit credence to the explanation that women are intrinsically more powerful, which is the reason why males have found it necessary to create their compensatory culture. All things being equal, Phyllis Chesler remarks (almost casually), then women will be superior, and men know it – which is why there is a real fight going on as men seek to protect and preserve their power. But in present circumstances the only real alternative that Phyllis Chesler can see to man-power is woman power.

The absence of any systematic discussion of consciousness and consciousness-raising in *Women and Madness* is perhaps surprising given its psychological framework. This does not mean that Phyllis Chesler does not take talk into account: on the contrary, her observations and analysis of talk between the sexes were amazingly astute and helped to provide the context for later interaction studies. But there is little discussion of what goes on in women's heads and the emphasis is on the practical and readily identifiable detail that serves to draw attention to the politics of the situation. Her categorical assertion that if women want to talk they had better talk to each other for they will get few if any opportunities to talk in the presence of men, provides a dramatic illustration of who has the power – and the right to talk (p.103).

Her commentary on the way men take over a topic and diminish and deny women's experience in the process, also reveals some of the political dimensions of day-to-day interaction between the sexes, and gives to women a helpful explanation of what is going on. Likewise, some of her descriptions of the exchanges between wives and husbands illuminate the dynamics of dealing with the oppressor, and release women from the conviction that somehow or other they are 'in the wrong'. The institutions of middle-class psychotherapy and marriage declares Phyllis Chesler. In marriage, the talking is usually of an indirect and rather inarticulate nature. Open expressions of rage are too dangerous and too ineffective for the isolated and economically self-blame, and in the husband graciously agreeing with his wife that she was 'not herself' (p.103). It is virtually impossible for a woman to have a real conversation with a man - particularly if the man is her husband, a therapist or employer, who has real direct power over her. For how is it possible to have a 'real' conversation with those who directly profit from her oppression? She would be laughed at, viewed as silly or crazy and, if she persisted, removed from her job - as secretary or wife, perhaps even as private patient' (p.103).

Phyllis Chesler makes it clear that there is no point in turning to men. This is no solution but part of the problem. What women need to do is to turn to other women and to show some of the care and compassion for each other that for centuries women have lavished on men. (Thus echoing some of Robin Morgan's words in *Going Too Far*, 1978.) Phyllis Chesler is distressed by our inability to live up to our own ideals of sisterhood and urges the greater effort and understanding necessary to a revolutionary goal. Woman power lies in woman support, she claims, and she boldly outlines the way women are deflected from achieving this goal, partly because of our own use of a double-standard. We too have one rule for men and one for women.

Thus in America Betty Friedan's or Gloria Steinem's or Kate Millet's 'contributions' to a particular women's cause are more actively expected and sought after than are Governor Rockefeller's, President Nixon's, the Ford Foundation's, the US Army's, General Motors' or the Vatican's, all institutions which have far greater resources than those of any individual woman or any individual woman's group. (Mommy

is still safer to milk, blame and hate than Daddy is. Daddy is feared and addressed in 'good girl' tones, or not addressed at all.) (p.258)

I think it is still very much the case that feminists are harder on each other than on anyone else, an attribute which is hardly useful and is indeed even difficult to discuss. But there can be no doubt that if feminists direct their criticisms at feminists it will be revolutionary suicide and remove any necessity for men to develop their strategies for divide and rule. And given the extent to which women are excluded from the control of meanings in a patriarchal society, there can be no doubt either that feminist criticisms of feminists and feminism are a ready, ruthless and reliable weapon in the hands of men. Yet paradoxically, the possibilities for criticism within feminism have grown at the same rate as the growth of a feminist body of knowledge: the more knowledge is available the greater is the chance of being 'unknowledgeable, of being wrong.

Phyllis Chesler emphasises that there are more questions than answers for feminists, and that we really don't have a single solution or course of action that will lead us to our goal. 'How can women learn to survive - and learn to value survival?' she asks. 'How can women banish self-sacrifice, guilt, naiveté, helplessness, madness, sorrow from the female condition? How - or should - women sever their ties to child-bearing and rearing? Should women stop being compassionate? Should or can there be a single standard of behaviour for both sexes? Is there such a thing as a biologically rooted female culture that should remain separate from male culture, partly because it is 'better' than male culture? (p.276). It is significant that she concludes *Women and Madness* with 'Thirteen Questions' (pp.280-3) which are no less relevant and no closer to being answered today.

Women and Madness could not have been written without some of the publications that went before, because its framework is one that had already been outlined. It is an in-depth exploration of a particular and fundamentally important aspect of oppression which builds on some of the meanings previously established. Yet despite the way it readily fits into the feminist framework I think that this is one thesis which is no closer to cultural acceptance or accommodation than it was a decade ago. There has been a feminist response - the development of a feminist psychology and feminist therapy - but there has been no essential change in the ethics of mental health, partly because it is so inextricably

interwoven with the concept of male-as-norm, a concept which shows few signs of being dislodged. To accept Phyllis Chesler's thesis that a male-dominated society defines women as mad is to challenge the foundations of our society; it is to challenge male power and to identify men as unqualified oppressors who have evolved a sophisticated and savage means of punishing women who step out of their place. This realisation would be too much for society to accept without its changing. I think it is highly significant that I have heard more criticisms of the Soviet Union's use of psychiatry for political purposes than I have ever heard of psychiatry for political purposes against women.

Women and Madness is too much: it is too bold, too bald, too bare. It strips patriarchy down to its essence and leaves little room for rationalisation. It paints a picture which is not at all pleasant: that is why I think many members of society prefer to look the other way.