

Acquitting Nietzsche

An Alternative View of his Infamous Misogyny

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Friedrich Nietzsche is widely regarded as a man who hated women. His work has been assaulted with accusations of misogyny. It is true that his writing contains numerous references to women, few of which seem complimentary when taken at face value. From his earliest works, to those composed at the end of his life, one can identify dozens of excerpts to support the misogyny charge. One can read almost any work by Nietzsche, employ a narrow interpretation, and conclude that he was in fact a misogynist. His comments regarding women appear, at best, ambiguous. At their worst, they seem down right degrading. At least *prima facie*, Nietzsche seems perhaps the most sexist philosopher in history. A closer examination of his book *Beyond Good and Evil* will reveal a different picture. There is a different exegesis of Nietzsche which exonerates him from the charge of misogyny. Properly construed, Nietzsche is revealed as a man who appreciated the natural instincts and potential power of women, and who, through his use of irony and his criticisms of both "woman as such" and women, wished to educate women on approaching the emancipation issue more effectively without losing their inherent femininity. He in fact implored women to cease in the cannibalization of other women and "woman as such" in order that they could better achieve their goal of emancipation or even better, from Nietzsche's perspective, to achieve a goal of self-overcoming, and in so doing become free spirits.

It is first and foremost important to comprehend the organization of Nietzsche's writing and his use of language. Those who read his work often conclude it is the work of a madman;

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the work appears convoluted, disorganized, and self-contradictory. The supposed convolution and disorganization of Nietzsche's writing demands that the reader explore the work at a deeper level, as if removing a mask, to uncover what the philosopher was truly attempting to convey. Furthermore, Nietzsche appears to often contradict himself because he employed such irony and humor in his rhetoric, causing the reader to experience an unexpected, delayed reaction contrary to the initial reaction when thinking about the issue at hand. Nietzsche's treatment of issues concerning gender and gender equality is consistent with his treatment of other controversial issues such as truth, philosophy, religion, and politics.

Secondly, Nietzsche struggled with language as a whole, believing that to speak one's view is to distort it. He felt one can never adequately convey one's meaning to another unless each person involved has had *precisely* the "same experiences in common."¹ He probably utilized the tools of irony, parody, and humor as a way of coping with his difficulties concerning the accuracy and value of language. Finally, because his work is so anfractuous, it is absolutely critical that any *one* comment of Nietzsche's be explicated only in context with the *greater whole* of his work. It is virtually impossible to make singular selections or anthologize Nietzsche without distorting his meaning.

As a final point of clarification, it is also critical that one understand the difference between Nietzsche's usage of the term "women" and his usage of "woman as such." In her book review of a recent translation of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Dr. Maudmarie Clark perceptively notes that Nietzsche employed the term "*das Weib an sich*" ("woman as such" or occasionally abbreviated simply to "woman") to refer to the social construction, psychology, physiology, and politics of the female and not about individual women who may or may not exemplify it. When writing about an individual woman, he used the term "*Frau*," the German term applicable to an individual woman indicating tremendous respect for her. Walter Kaufman, who translated *Beyond Good and Evil*, translates this as simply "women."² This distinction is important for two reasons. First, by understanding that Nietzsche

differentiated between “woman as such” (or “woman”) and “women,” it becomes clearer that the object at which Nietzsche proceeded to direct his derogatory comments was not individual women, but rather the social construction and generalization of women and the *way* in which women at the time were attempting their emancipation. Additionally, it is important to note Nietzsche’s use of the word “*Frau*” because it presupposes a level of respect that he held for women, which he would not hold were he truly a misogynist.

In understanding Nietzsche’s organization, his use of linguistic tools such as irony, parody, and humor, and his definitions of “woman” verses “women” it is now possible to venture into the text of *Beyond Good and Evil* free of gender-biases and attempt to untangle what he actually said about women and the struggle of “woman as such” to attain equal rights through emancipation.

It is far too easy to read a seemingly derogatory passage, misconstrue Nietzsche’s true meaning, and draw erroneous conclusions. When reading certain excerpts, it appears that there is no way whatsoever to defend Nietzsche against the misogyny charge. For example, he seemingly advises men to treat women as possessions destined for service.

A man, on the other hand, who has depth, in his spirit as well as in his desires, including that depth of benevolence which is capable of severity and hardness and easily mistaken for them, must always think about woman as *Oriental*s do: he must conceive of woman as a possession, a property that can be locked, as something predestined for service and achieving her perfection in that.³

This passage, taken by itself, is notably harder to defend than others. Alone, it could never be construed positively or used to exonerate him. It does appear that here Nietzsche is claiming that any man with spirit (something Nietzsche holds as valuable) would only keep a woman as a possession. It is hard to know

what Nietzsche is trying to say in this excerpt. I surmise that he is perhaps bestowing the reader with the same forms of irony, parody, and humor that he utilizes elsewhere throughout the book. As I claimed previously, it is impossible to make individual selections or anthologize Nietzsche without distorting him. Admittedly, this particular selection casts Nietzsche in a bad (i.e., misogynist) light. I can only recommend not taking this passage by itself, but in context with the remainder of Nietzsche's work, viewed as a whole product. It seems unlikely that Nietzsche would write an entire book throughout which women and "woman" are treated with respect (called *Frau*, and counseled on more appropriately approaching issues of equality without compromising themselves or cannibalizing one another) and then arbitrarily include small passages betraying an ulterior misogyny. Because he left us no clarification, we must settle for simply not knowing his true meaning in this passage. We must weigh it against, and place it in the context of, a work that is evidently largely pro-female.

There is adequate evidence that Nietzsche was in fact in favor of women, and in favor of educating women about approaching "woman as such" more effectively. He can be elucidated as a man who admired woman's instincts as inherently feminine and respected women, not as an evil misogynist.

In various ways throughout the book, Nietzsche demonstrates his appreciation for "instincts" and "the natural." For example, to summarize his thoughts on the history of morals, Nietzsche describes morality as being *against* instinct. Morality is therefore bad. If a person holds virtues at all, they must be in accord with instincts. Here, he reveals his respect for that which is instinctual. His treatment of women is consistent with his other thoughts regarding the value of nature and instinct. He holds an appreciation and respect for the natural instincts of women.

Woe when "the eternally boring woman" - she is rich in that! - is permitted to venture forth [toward emancipation]! When she begins to unlearn thoroughly and on principle her prudence of art - of

grace, of play, of chasing away worries, of lightening burdens and taking things lightly – and her subtle aptitude for agreeable desires!⁴

Initially, this passage could appear to be one of his “sexist remarks.” At a very superficial level, one could be offended, claiming that Nietzsche is first calling woman boring and is secondly stating that woman should not be allowed to venture forth: “Woe” when woman is allowed to attempt it. There is, however, another interpretation of this text. First, one must know that “the eternally boring woman” is in reference to Goethe’s *Faust* and his allusion to “the Eternal-Feminine.” Goethe held women in the highest esteem, claiming “Women, eternally, show us the way.”⁵ By alluding to Goethe, Nietzsche divulges his respect for woman. He acknowledges her instincts, her prudence, of grace, play, chasing away worries, lightening burdens, etc. These are abilities of woman that are notably good. Nietzsche’s “woe” is not a grievance over women who might venture forth! The antecedent of his “woe” is his theory that woman will unlearn those instinctual drives within her which are good, and that she will unlearn them completely and as a matter of principle.

To cease being that which is most instinctually feminine in an effort to obtain equal rights misses the point of having those rights. He continues exploring the nature of women:

What inspires respect for woman, and often enough even fear, is her *nature*, which is more “natural” than man’s, the genuine, cunning suppleness of a beast of prey, the tiger’s claw under the glove, the naiveté of her egoism, her uneducability and inner wildness, the incomprehensibility, scope, and movement of her desires and virtues-

What, in spite of all fear, elicits pity for this dangerous and beautiful cat “woman” is that she appears to suffer more, to be more vulnerable, more in need of love, and more condemned to disappoint than any other animal.⁶

Here again, one could find Nietzsche's words offensive. One could focus solely on the appearance that Nietzsche is calling women naive, uneducable, incomprehensible, in need of pity, and doomed to always disappoint. A better interpretation is that this is Nietzsche's respect for woman. He holds a healthy respect, albeit based in fear, for that which is natural in woman. He finds her sleek, as a beast of prey, dangerous, uneducable – that is, unable to be tamed. She is wild and free, yet appears soft, supple, in need of love, and vulnerable. A woman is condemned to disappoint not because she is inherently a disappointing creature, but because she is inherently a paradoxical creature, one who appears so vulnerable on the exterior and yet bears the tiger's claw if one is able to get her glove off. It is precisely this interior resistance against being tamed that causes woman to act as she does: "In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man."⁷ A woman in love (or hate) is more barbarous, i.e. *passionate*, than a man. Love is a natural instinct which Nietzsche must honor, for he states, "Whatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil."⁸

Clark writes, "A major point of these passages concerning the instinct of woman may be to point to the contradictions in our idea of the female – which, Nietzsche shows us, includes being both more natural hence animal-like *and* more spiritual than the male – which make it impossible for any individual woman to exemplify [these traits]."⁹ Perhaps because he appreciates the natural instincts of women, Nietzsche wants to educate women about woman as such on two fronts. He wants to first show them how they are viewed, criticizing their behaviors, to draw to light the actions of women that inhibit the progress and emancipation of woman as such. Secondly, he appears to want to educate women on the errors they make while attempting to achieve progress and the goal of emancipation. In simple terms, he seems to say "You women act like *xyz* and perhaps if you did not act like *xyz*, you would have better luck at obtaining your goal of *abc*."

Nietzsche's criticisms of woman and women are found throughout the book. He criticizes women claiming "Woman has much reason for shame; so much pedantry, superficiality, school-

marmishness, petty presumption, petty licentiousness and immodesty lies concealed in woman.”¹⁰ He questions, “Has ever a woman conceded profundity to a woman’s head, or justice to a woman’s heart? And is it not true that on the whole “woman” has so far been despised most by woman herself – and by no means by us?”¹¹ Of *course* these criticisms are painful to hear, especially as it must be confessed that the observations are largely accurate, though no individual woman likes to admit this is the case. Women have possibly done far more to damage both individual women and woman as such than men have conceived. Venture into any high-school, college, office, or PTA meeting, and witness women’s treatment of woman. This is the cannibalization theory of woman. Women practically eat woman alive with pettiness, back-stabbing, gossip, and spite. The seemingly inherent nature of the stereotypical female to behave in such manner against other females is far more notably a cause for the lack of successes for woman than male oppression. “Women themselves always still have in the background of all personal vanity an impersonal contempt – for ‘woman.’”¹² There exists a ridiculous notion that any time a male criticizes a female, he is sexist or misogynist. Criticisms can and should be constructive, especially when they are accurate and they can potentially assist the process of self-overcoming, leading to achievement of a goal. That Nietzsche criticizes women for their treatment of woman, regardless of the notably harsh tone of the critique, does not make him a misogynist. One can charge Nietzsche with being abrupt and crass but cannot indict him as a sexist on the basis of his critique. His criticisms show him to be *interested* in the cause of woman. He is essentially educating women on the cannibalization behaviors that must cease if they are to succeed in emancipation. After all, no attempt at emancipation can succeed as long as women are still contemptuous toward ‘woman.’

Nietzsche witnessed the beginning of the women’s emancipation movement in Europe and keenly observed that it was that very movement which was dulling feminine instincts. Women were losing touch with their femininity. Additionally,

women were also losing what influence they had without even being aware of it.

Woman's influence in Europe has *decreased* proportionately as her rights and claims have increased; and the "emancipation of woman," insofar as that is demanded and promoted by women themselves (and not merely by shallow males) is thus seen as an odd symptom of the increasing *stupidity* in this movement, an almost masculine stupidity of which a woman who had turned out well... would have to be thoroughly ashamed.¹³

Superficially, one could claim that Nietzsche is calling the emancipation movement *stupid*, claiming that women should be ashamed of attempting this movement. To the contrary, this passage is not demeaning to women or woman, it is demeaning to men! The *stupidity* of the movement was not the movement itself, but rather that woman could not see how, by going about the movement all wrong, she was actually losing her influence. If this were true, it would indeed be an incredibly stupid mistake to make, and Nietzsche claims it is the kind of mistake a man would make.

It seems as though Nietzsche wished to educate women as to how to approach their struggle for equality. As it was, women were approaching equality by abandoning their femininity and feminine instinct and, in essence, trying to become men. He would rather have woman become ever more womanly and man ever more manly. By attempting to masculinize women we run the risk of simultaneously feminizing men, jeopardizing the future. Nietzsche claims "One must know how *to conserve oneself*: the hardest test of independence."¹⁴ Women do not fall outside of this prerequisite for independence. "We men wish that woman should not go on compromising herself through enlightenment." He is not saying 'we men wish women would not become enlightened!'¹⁵ No, he is saying, 'become enlightened, just please do not lose yourself, your instincts, your femininity in the process! Do not compromise yourself!' He criticizes the way that

women attempt emancipation as clumsy and overly scientific.¹⁶ He poses the question, "Is it not in the worst taste when woman sets about becoming scientific in that way?"¹⁷ He observed "It was for woman's good when Napoleon [said]: *woman should be silent when it comes to politics!* And I think it is a real friend of women that counsels them today: *women should be silent about woman.*"¹⁸ This rhetoric could easily be misconstrued as perhaps the worst, most degrading comment about women, advising them to just be quiet. I do not concur! Nietzsche is trying to be a "real friend" to woman by advising her that she should stop talking about women, cannibalizing them, thwarting their own efforts at equality. He further advises women to be wary of the models they adduce in *favor* of "woman as such." Evidently, at the time, women were misinterpreting and therefore erroneously employing three representatives in defense of their movement. Nietzsche warns them that these examples were merely comical and actually *counterarguments*, *actually counterproductive* to their cause.¹⁹ Were he against the women's emancipation movement, or a hater of women, Nietzsche would never counsel accordingly! Moreover Nietzsche also equally harshly criticizes men for inhibiting woman's progress from occurring more properly.

To be sure, there are enough imbecilic friends and corrupters of woman among the scholarly asses of the male sex who advise woman to defeminize herself in this way and to imitate all the stupidities with which "man" in Europe, European "manliness" is sick: they would like to reduce woman to the level of "general education," probably even reading the newspapers and talking about politics. Here and there they even want to turn women into freethinkers and scribblers – as if a woman without piety would not seem utterly obnoxious and ridiculous to a profound and godless man."²⁰

It is not that Nietzsche believes women should not be allowed to read newspapers or talk about politics. Nietzsche holds a vision

for woman that is so much grander than what they are striving for. Do they not see that men are socializing them into being male-defined? And that the gross majority of males can only define themselves, let alone woman, as a part of the herd? Nietzsche seems to want to counsel, 'stop being male-defined and actively engage in creating woman's identity.' Nietzsche saw that in woman's efforts to become equal, she was accidentally and unknowingly reducing herself to mediocrity. To become equal would be to become a part of the herd. He wants woman to avoid "the degeneration and diminution into the perfect herd animal."²¹ He encourages woman against striving for mere mediocrity, imploring her to reach higher, perhaps toward the principles of self-overcoming, actualizing her will to power, and becoming a free-spirit.

Because Nietzsche valued will to power, his condemnation of women is likely targeted at their denial of power within themselves. For Nietzsche, power is the highest value. Pain, suffering, unhappiness and cruelty all have a power-enhancing quality to them if one is able to overcome them. Tension of the soul in unhappiness cultivates us. Courage, strength, perseverance, spirit, masks, cunning, and greatness are all achieved only through suffering – *great* suffering.²² Woman is constantly faced both with oppression by males and cannibalization by other women. Because of the great suffering inherent in the existence of woman (in Nietzsche's day) there must, by Nietzsche's philosophy, have been a great pearl of wisdom in woman – a great potential seed of power to be harvested. If only woman could move toward her potential, draw forth her "granite of spiritual *fatum*,"²³ she could realize the basic aspect of will to power – the will to surface and the will to knowledge²⁴ and be well on her way toward becoming a free spirit! But, first things first, woman must be able to overcome herself and she must be able to overcome the social construction of femininity and the desire to conform to male images of the feminine.

Charges that Friedrich Nietzsche was a misogynist are erroneous. His work, when read as ironic, parodying, and subverting stereotypes about women, can actually be useful for the

feminist movement. His ideas and criticisms of women, when taken constructively, show him to have great compassion for their struggles and have founded many feminist ideas. Some scholars might beg us to ignore Nietzsche's comments on women – claiming he is such a good philosopher elsewhere, we should just ignore them. To ignore Nietzsche on women and woman as such would be to rob him of some important ideas. While some passages concerning females are admittedly inexplicable, most can be shown to be favorable to women without straining the text in any way whatsoever. Because of this, it is unfair to dismiss Nietzsche as a sexist who speaks to us from the past and whose concerns are now obsolete and inaccessible to us. The richness of these apparently sexist selections should lead readers to be suspicious of the initial impression they make, causing her to delve deeper. After more carefully reviewing the text, I have concluded that Nietzsche should be acquitted of the indictment of misogyny. In evaluating my interpretation of *Beyond Good and Evil*, I do not feel I have strained the text or distorted it in Nietzsche's defense. My finding of Nietzsche as pro-female is well grounded in the text. Nietzsche should be regarded as a philosopher who respected women, held them in high esteem, and wished to encourage and guide them in their efforts at emancipation.

Notes

1. BGE, 216
2. Clark, NDPR 2002.08.02
3. BGE, 167
4. BGE, 163
5. Goethe, 305
6. BGE, 169
7. BGE, 88
8. BGE, 90
9. Clark, NDPR 2002.08.12
10. BGE, 163
11. BGE, 164
12. BGE, 82

13. BGE, 168
14. BGE, 52
15. BGE, 164
16. BGE, 162
17. BGE, 163
18. BGE, 164
19. BGE, 164
20. BGE, 169
21. BGE, 118
22. BGE, 154
23. BGE, 162
24. BGE, 161

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Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude of Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. Vintage Books. New York, NY 1974. *The Gay Science*, though not specifically referred to in this paper, indubitably swayed my thinking as it relates to *Beyond Good and Evil*.