“Early Modern” Views of Women

The early modern emphasis on tradition is perhaps clearest in the history of women during this period, as at the core of each culture was an ingrained patriarchy dating back thousands of years. In the West, for example, attitudes towards women were shaped by three strains of ancient European tradition: first, Judeo-Christian belief, which characterized women as either saintly, like the Virgin Mary, or corrupted, like Eve; second, Greek philosophy, which conceived of women’s physical frailty as leading also to their irrationality and intellectual inferiority; and third, Roman law, which denied women a legal persona and subjugated them to the control of male representatives.

In China, on the other hand, it was Neo-Confucianism which informed beliefs about the inferiority of women. Confucianism set a strict social hierarchy, which was seen as crucial to the maintenance of order. Although not originally intended to subjugate women, Confucian ideology ultimately implied that, just as emperors were to rule over subjects, men were to be lords over women. These traditions, only two among many others with similar beliefs, came to influence a large portion of the globe, making common the idea that women were physically and intellectually inferior to men, and consequently shaping the implementation of a social system ever more concentrated on controlling women, segregating them to the private sphere.

Contemporaries around the globe believed that the inferiority of women that tradition decreed made females dangerous if not controlled; they could subvert order—whether social, economic, or spiritual—by being easy prey to evil and thus becoming the vehicle for men’s ruin. Therefore, during this period, male literature on “dangerous women” became prevalent, warning men against females who did not abide by prescribed behaviors. Equally common were books where such prescriptions were set out. Written for women with the aim of teaching them to behave correctly, and thus prove their ultimate worth, conduct manuals taught obedience, modesty, and silence. As proven by the manuals’ popularity, many women voluntarily espoused the principles set out in them.

However, this is not to say that women did not have a dissenting voice or did not find ways to challenge gender roles. In fact, in the history of women across the globe, the early modern period is characterized by an increase in women’s literacy, which gave birth to a female literature condemning men’s subjugation of them and arguing for women’s inherent worth. The rise of a vocal female presence in literature and art is one of the most significant developments of the era. Equally important was the advent of new opportunities for women to claim, in an age of contact and acculturation, crucial roles in the evangelization and “civilizing” of the world around them.

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1 Patriarchy: A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.
2 Subvert: Undermine the power and authority of.
3 Espoused: Adopt or support.
4 Dissenting: Hold or express opinions that are different from those officially expressed.
5 Subjugation: forced submission to control by others.
6 Evangelization: To convert to Christianity.