Nietzsche on Women: Near and Far

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Preface

To read Nietzsche on any subject without some knowledge or experience with his total philosophy is to misread him. To misread Nietzsche is to do more disservice to him than not to read him at all. As great a disservice is done when one tries to understand his thoughts and ideas on a subject without making an attempt to find all he wrote on the subject. Such is the case with the subject of women.

Numerous references to women can be found throughout Nietzsche's writings. Taking each reference as a totally conclusive thought on women will only lead to bewilderment and absurdity. Nietzsche did not mean to be read in this way. What Nietzsche says in each reference to women must be compared and contrasted with all other references in order to begin to understand how he feels about women. Each reference contains something of what Nietzsche believed about women. Each one of his beliefs winds its way through, and indeed becomes part of, all his other references to women to create one diversified, seemingly contradictory, vision of women. Even then, the complexity of this vision can easily lead to misunderstanding. It is worthwhile and desirable to make all efforts to understand what Nietzsche thought and felt about women.
Within this paper the attempt will be made to present Nietzsche's vision of women from two different viewpoints--her relationship with men and the concept of the feminine. From a historical aspect, it is obvious that social roles of women have significantly changed over the past century. It is surprising that Nietzsche wrote little on the nineteenth century woman as such. A close reading will reveal that the important things that Nietzsche saw in women are still there today. Anyone who is interested in what it means to be a woman must take into account Nietzsche's writings--they contain too much truth to be dismissed.
Proteus-Nature. -- Through love women actually become what they appear to be in the imagination of their lovers.

-- Nietzsche

*Human, All-too-human*
Man and Woman

The Enemies of Women.--"Women is our enemy."--the man who speaks to men in this way exhibits an unbridled lust which not only hates itself but also its means.¹

That men and women are not enemies does not imply that they are allies. Men and women are inseparable. This, as a law of nature, can provide a great deal of information (and misinformation) about both men and women. The relationship between a man and a woman, sometimes called marriage, can do much to point out the differences between a man and a woman. Men and women base their relationships on many factors--this alone is enough to show that much about these relationships is misunderstood. Perhaps this also shows that much about men and women is misunderstood.

The relationship between a man and a woman is commonly based on a notion of love. Nietzsche claims such marriages have "error for their father and need (necessity) for their mother."² In fact, the notion of love is now so closely tied with the notion of marriage that a man and a woman may actually force themselves to "fall in love" as a justification of a convenient match.³ Such an idolized love has grown out of a recognition on the part of woman that she can use love as a device to make herself more desirable. An "exaggerated appreciation of love" has resulted and the origin of love as a device has been forgotten. Woman has only deceived herself and is therefore today most susceptible to disillu-
sionment in love. Men and women that get caught by this
game of love probably have a concept of love that includes
much error. As the game becomes futile and tiring, they
just quit playing. At this level, Nietzsche suggests more
practical considerations for a good marriage. For example,
"a good marriage is based on a talent for friendship." Equally as practical is the suggestion that a man be sure
he will be able to talk with his wife until his old age.
Surely these two alone will make for a better marriage
than an idolized love. This is not meant to imply, however,
that a man and a woman should not love each other, only that
love as a device leads to shallowness. Men and women do
love each other and this fact is essential to the under-
standing of what men and women mean to each other.

When one speaks about a man and a woman loving each
other, one must realize that love involves a substantial
amount of vanity if that love has any value at all. "The
sexuals deceive themselves about each other--because at bottom
they honor and love only themselves (or their own ideal,
to put it more pleasantly)." This point must be emphasized
strongly. If a woman feels her love is valuable, she will
hold a certain amount of vanity with it. The same is true
for a man. Here, the underlying nature of the vanity of
a woman and the vanity of a man will be extremely different
and serves to show one of the essential differences between
a man and woman. For both man and woman, love involves
a certain amount of selfishness—they each desire that the love they feel be somehow personally beneficial. Nietzsche saw this as a good practical basis for marriage:

A marriage in which each wishes to realise an individual aim by means of the other will stand well; for instance, when the woman wishes to become famous through the man and the man beloved through the woman.  

A woman's vanity in love is composed of several strong forces. Knowing the existence of these forces and knowing that they produce feelings in a woman that she will deal with can lead to some understanding of what love means to a woman. These forces often conflict in what each is trying to achieve. This does not imply, however, that the conflict should be resolved. Most assuredly, the conflict should not be resolved. The very existence of such a conflict makes woman multi-dimensional. The fact that they do exist demands that they be considered when considering women. For example, vanity demands that a woman be the sole object of a man's love. She is quite able to perceive when she has a rival for a man's love and will be competitive with any rival; even ambitions, politics, sciences, and art. At the same time, however, she also knows that "it is equivalent to underrating a man to suppose that he needs only a girl to make him happy. Women's vanity requires a man to be something more than merely a happy husband." Woman is left with a conflict. She would gladly keep her man totally to herself, but her vanity will not permit such
an action. For a woman to seek to resolve such a conflict is the same as compromising herself. Unfortunately, this is precisely what many women have done. More unfortunately, such women prove very attractive to certain men for certain men are excited by seeking what isn’t there.  

A woman is further distinguished from man by a feminine intellect which is quite different than a masculine intellect. "The intellect of women manifests itself as perfect mastery, presence of mind, and utilisation of all advantages." This gives women a tremendous amount of power. Men have been able to achieve more with their intelligence, however, because they have the benefit of "deeper and more powerful impulses." As Nietzsche says, "For those who know how to put a thing properly: women have intelligence, men have character and passion." This becomes most interesting when it comes to choosing a partner. Men will look for a woman who possesses a "deep and strong character," while women admire "intelligence, brilliancy, and presence of mind" in a man. That is, "it is plain that at bottom men seek for the ideal man, and women for the ideal woman,--consequently not for the complement out for the completion of their own excellence." Again, this is vanity.  

It is probably at this point that Nietzsche begins to be misunderstood and dismissed. What becomes of this great feminine intellect? Nietzsche sees its very strength proven by the fact that a woman "offers her intellect as a
sacrifice out of love for a man and his intellect"--its very strength is proven by the fact that "a second intellect at once arises as an aftergrowth, to which the man's mind impels her."\textsuperscript{15} Woman makes this sacrifice out of love which would seem to imply that it is her vanity that requires her to do this. To make such a sacrifice is not to be confused as a weakness--there is no indication that Nietzsche thought of it as such. What such a sacrifice (a sacrifice out of love) does imply is that the woman's vanity is aware of the need for something in return. Her vanity demands that the sacrifice have value. Man often needs to fear if he offends woman on this point for she will not cease to sacrifice out of love--her defense will be other than ceasing to sacrifice.\textsuperscript{16}

That man makes no such sacrifice as a result of his love shows that men's and women's views on love are most different in essence. Nietzsche sees it in this way:

\begin{quote}
What woman understands by love is clear enough: complete surrender (not merely devotion) of soul and body, without any motive, without any reservation, rather with shame and terror at the thought of a devotion restricted by clauses or associated with conditions. In this absence of conditions her love is precisely a faith: woman has no other. Man, when he loves a woman, wants precisely this love from her; he is consequently, as regards himself, furthest removed from the prerequisites of feminine love; granted, however, that there should also be men to whom on their side the demand for complete devotion is not unfamiliar,--well, they are really--not men.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}
By such love, man is envisioning the perfect man and woman is envisioning the perfect woman. These concepts of love lose their meaning if they are not carried to their ultimate and full conclusion. Man wants to take and woman wants to be taken. Further, woman is truly offended if man does not desire to take all of her. Nietzsche fully understands what he is saying and also knows how many will desire to reject this that he sees as a natural law:

I do not think one will get over this natural contrast by any social contract, or with the very best will to do justice, however desirable it may be to avoid bringing the severe, frightful, enigmatic, and unmoral elements of this antagonism constantly before our eyes.  

When a woman loves, she desires to be completely possessed by a man. When a man loves, he desires to completely possess his woman. Do not make a mistake on this point! The realization of possession necessarily ends the desire and so the love. In most such cases, it is the woman's mistake--in this she has much to learn, for it is here that woman will find she has her greatest power concerning men. It is more important now, however, that both men and women realize some basic truths about their existence. Only then will it be possible for them to learn what they can possibly do.  

As a basis, woman must realize that she is secondary to man. It is unfortunate that this seems to imply that man is superior to her for the implication is false. In fact, a good case can be made for just the opposite, but it is unnecessary to do so. The importance here is to show what
results when woman feels inferior because of her secondary role. (Actually, woman has come to feel inferior probably through some modern day psychological disease, a decadence and deterioration. Men have the same disease, but are affected differently. Woman's vanity will not let her acknowledge that something is wrong with her, so she blames her feelings on outside conditions.) Deterioration of all that is feminine begins when women seek "equality" with men. Their motivations cannot be healthy. Why would women want to become men? That some women seek to be like men immediately confesses that they are anti-woman and women who are interested in the feminine will do best to be wary of such movements.

"Woman, the more she is a woman, resists rights in general hand and foot: after all, the state of nature, the eternal war between the sexes, gives her by far the first rank."19 Nietzsche's strong words for the advocates of equal rights for women surely have application for many today:

"Emancipation of women"—that is the instinctive hatred of the abortive woman, who is incapable of giving birth, against the woman who is turned out well... as a female "idealist," they want to lower the level of the general rank of woman; and there is no surer means for that than higher education, slacks, and political voting-cattle rights.20

Nietzsche became quite vehement on this point in three fiery sections of Beyond Good and Evil (232, 238, and 239). Men and women are not the same thing:

To go wrong on the fundamental problem of "man and woman," to deny the most abysmal
antagonism between them and the necessity of an eternally hostile tension, to dream perhaps of equal rights, equal education, equal claims and obligations--that is a typical sign of shallowness.\textsuperscript{21}

The "eternally hostile tension" is indeed a necessity--much power is drawn for both sexes. Woman must be possessed by man as she is predestined for service. Nietzsche makes it quite clear that it is through service that women will attain perfection.\textsuperscript{22}

Lest one condemns Nietzsche on this point, it is necessary to note exactly what he feels about the perfection of women. The idea should not be undesirable. First of all, as a generality, "the perfect woman is a higher type of humanity than the perfect man, and also something much rarer. The natural history of animals furnishes grounds in support of this theory."\textsuperscript{23} As a practicality, for the benefit of men and women, woman's "first and last profession is [to] give birth to strong children."\textsuperscript{24} For the future and a hope, Zarathustra says:

In a real man a child is hidden--and wants to play. Go to it women, discover the child in man! Let woman be a plaything, pure and find, like a gem, irradiated by the virtues of a world that has not yet arrived. Let the radiance of a star shine through your love! Let your hope be: May I give birth to the overman!\textsuperscript{25}

The emphasis of the feminine is here the fundamental difference between men and women. In exploring woman, one must explore the feminine.
Man Promises, Woman Fulfills.--By woman Nature shows how far she has hitherto achieved her task of fashioning humanity, by man she shows what she has had to overcome and what she still proposes to do for humanity:--
The most perfect woman of every age is the holiday-task of the Creator on every seventh day of culture, the recreation of the artist from his work.

--Nietzsche
Human, All-too-human, Part I
The Feminine

1

Examine, if you will, the uses woman has made of the feminine intellect mentioned earlier. Recall that its manifestations have so far been "perfect mastery, presence of mind, and utilisation of all advantages." In particular, these manifestations have been viewed as very female traits. Their existence has been mocked and, far worse, their significance and power have been ignored. Notice, for instance, that women most regularly make strong decisions, for or against, based not on objectivity or justice, but on "the flashing illumination of personal relations caused by their spasmodic inclinations and aversions." Whether this is "right" or "wrong" has no meaning here. Such a deep bias gives women a most untouchable basis for their convictions and such a basis provides infinite support.

Therefore, women are to be more feared than men when they hate. Their devotion in hate will be as strong as their devotion in love. A woman will have no feelings of fairness (due to the nature of her hatred), and her intellect will be able to aid her in perceiving the most vulnerable areas of the object of her hatred. Yet this very hatred should be understood as a woman's defense. Thus spoke Zarathustra:

Let man fear woman when she hates: for deep down in his soul man is merely evil, while woman is bad. "Hom does woman hate most?
Thus spoke the iron to the magnet: 'I hate you most because you attract, but are not strong enough to pull me to you.'

Do not ignore hatred as a defense. A woman will use it to defend that which is feminine within her. That it also becomes concealed in the process is most unfortunate. This is not the only concealment. A woman's most effective concealment of her power is accomplished by the appearances she can project. Look closely at what a woman can accomplish. She uses "tears, sobs, and discomposed mien" to intentionally make a man suffer. She can exaggerate her weakness, affecting man's conscience, and thus dissolve any "might" in "right." She can exaggerate her weakness and get man to support her. Women are quite aware of what they are capable of accomplishing. Men over-estimate what women have accomplished.

At this point, modern women must be careful. Men have been blamed for placing women in a situation that they have placed themselves. Women are now suffering from a loss of memory and have been caught in their own net. To attribute men with the responsibility for the position of women is to pay them a compliment they don't deserve. Modern women do not know what their self-reliance would bring to light. Much that is concealed in women should remain so:

For what must these clumsy attempts of women at scientific self-exposure bring to light! Woman has much reason for shame; so much pedantry, superficiality, schoolmarmishness, petty presumption, petty licentiousness and immodesty
lies concealed in woman—one only needs to study her behavior with children!—and so far all this was at bottom best repressed and kept under control by fear of man. 33

A woman's fear of man must remain as part of the hostile tension between the sexes. To unlearn this fear and the sharpness it means would be an enormous step in transforming woman into man. Such a transformation taking place will be harmful to both men and women. Will it be possible for woman to unlearn her fear at any other time then when the fear is no longer motivated? Surely such a degeneration of both men and women is to be avoided. Woman is just intellectual enough to convince man that she no longer needs to fear him. Man is passionate enough to believe her.

The ultimate conclusion is this: When woman unlearns her fear of man, she becomes bored. What hope is there for a bored woman?

A woman without feminity would have nothing to occupy her time. Women will not set about on any organized exploration for a system of knowledge. She has neither the motivation nor the talent for such actions. Do not mistake and think that this has been caused by "society" or "man's attitudes." That she does not make such explorations is the result of where woman finds her interest. That men have been responsible for the development of every major field of study has been no accident, but is not due to man's superiority over women. It will be found that a
woman's femininity saves her from having to deal with truth. What need is there for a woman to deal with truth? She has more talent with appearance. Appearance has the most value for her while truth means nothing. This is because she has no use for truth. Nietzsche takes this idea, that the feminine has no use for truth, and goes as far as to suggest that women are against truth. Women are disgusted by truth and any who try to show women truth only seek their revenge. Truth as such can do nothing for women. Those who know the feminine know and accept this.

Carefully reading certain parts of some of the more poetic sections of Nietzsche will best communicate Nietzsche's own sense of the feminine. It is difficult to deal with the idea of the feminine in explicit terms. What has been dealt with to this point will hopefully take on a new dimension when looked at in light of a few important sections. (Parts of the most essential sections have been included here as an appendix.)

The essence and importance of woman will remain in her relationship and effect upon man. That a woman is enchanting and mysterious proves to be her greatest attraction. A man will deeply long for that which he imagines
possesses the power to dissolve all that is pounding against him and provide him with eternal rest and happiness. Remember, though, that a woman is a master of appearance and has many deep and bad things concealed in her. For a man to achieve closeness is to destroy this appearance. This should be a most important lesson for woman. "The enchantment and the most powerful effect of women is . . . an effect at a distance." Women maintaining a distance and men deeply longing is the source of a great tension which should create and bear the strength of great upward movements.

The basis of Nietzsche's philosophy involves a non-conditional affirmation of life. One does not have to read far to become involved in mountains and the strength that is necessary to attain such heights. Zarathustra knows this and is continually climbing. The Feminine takes on the greatest significance when one listens to Zarathustra in his dancing songs. In these two songs one can learn much about women. Zarathustra has powerfully drawn together all of Nietzsche's little truths about women. They are all there in those few short pages. No where else does Nietzsche write so explicitly and clearly about the Feminine. Those few sections I take to be the very essence of Zarathustra—the very basis on which Zarathustra builds his longings. (Some will understand when I speak of foundations.) One must know that Zarathustra loves life. One must know that
life keeps Zarathustra at a distance. One must know that Zarathustra is risen to his greatest longing:

Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for I love you, O eternity.

For I love you, O eternity!
Postscript

Nietzsche claims to know women as part of his "Dionysian dowry" and further suggests that he is "the first psychologist of the eternally feminine." These claims are not easily disproved. What Nietzsche wrote as his observations of women are overwhelmingly realistic. To ask what something is and to ask what something should be are two different questions. Nietzsche answers the former when it comes to women. The latter involves too much speculation to be of significance. However one feels about women as Nietzsche presents them, one must not doubt that he was quite serious when he wrote about women. It will be worthwhile to read Nietzsche with equal seriousness. I submit that Nietzsche indeed does know women. I challenge anyone to deny that Nietzsche's vision of the feminine is a major part of Nietzsche's total philosophy. As woman is fundamental to nature, so the concept of the feminine is fundamental to woman. Nietzsche explores this realistically. To know this vision of the feminine and to be able to incorporate it into Nietzsche's philosophy will add another dimension to one of the most dynamic philosophies of western thought.
Appendix
From

The Dancing Song

Into your eyes I looked recently, O life! And into
the unfathomable I then seemed to be sinking, but you pulled
me out with a golden fishing rod; and you laughed mockingly
when I called you unfathomable.

"Thus runs the speech of all fish," you said; "what
they do not fathom is unfathomable. But I am merely changeable
and wild and a woman in every way, and not virtuous—even if
you men call me profound, faithful, eternal, and mysterious.
But you men always present us with your own virtues, O you
virtuous men!"

Thus she laughed, the incredible one; but I never
believe her and her laughter when she speaks ill of herself.

And when I talked in confidence with my wild wisdom
she said to me in anger, "You will, you want, you love—
that is the only reason why you praise life." Then I almost
answered wickedly and told the angry woman the truth; and
there is no more wicked answer than telling one's wisdom the
truth.

For thus matters stand among the three of us: Deeply
I love only life—and verily, most of all when I hate life.
but that I am well disposed toward wisdom, and often too well,
that is because she reminds me so much of life. She has her
eyes, her laugh, and even her little golden fishing rod: is
it my fault that the two look so similar?

And when life once asked me, "who is this wisdom?"
I answered fervently, "Oh yes, wisdom! One thirsts after
her and is never satisfied; one looks through veils, one grabs
through nets. Is she beautiful? How should I know? But
even the oldest carps are baited with her. She is changeable
and stubborn; often I have seen her bite her lip and comb
her hair against the grain. Perhaps she is evil and false
and a female in every way; but just when she speaks ill of
herself she is most seductive."

When I said this to life she laughed sarcastically and
closed her eyes. "Of whom are you speaking?" she asked; "no
doubt, of me. And even if you are right—should that be said
to my face? But now speak of your wisdom too."

Ah, and then you opened your eyes again, O beloved
life. And again I seemed to myself to be sinking into the
unfathomable.

Friedrich Nietzsche
Thus Spoke Zarathustra
Second Part
From
The Other Dancing Song

2

Then life answered me thus, covering up her delicate ears: "O Zarathustra, don't crack your whip so frightfully! After all, you know that noise murders thought—and just now such tender thoughts are coming to me. We are both two real good-for-nothings and evil-for-nothings; beyond good and evil we found our island and our green meadow—we two alone. Therefore we had better like each other. And even if we do not love each other from the heart—need we bear each other a grudge if we do not love each other from the heart? And that I like you, often too well, that you; and the reason is that I am jealous of your wisdom. Oh, this mad old fool of a wisdom! If your wisdom ever ran away from you, then my love would quickly run away from you too."

Then life looked back and around thoughtfully and said softly: "O Zarathustra, you are not faithful enough to me. You do not love me nearly as much as you say; I know you are thinking of leaving me soon. There is an old heavy, heavy growl—bell that growls at night all the way up to your cave; when you hear this bell strike the hour at midnight, then you think between one and twelve—you think, O Zarathustra, I know it, or how you want to leave me soon."

"Yes," I answered hesitantly, "but you also know—" and I whispered something into her ear, right through her tangled yellow foolish tresses.

"You know that, O Zarathustra? Nobody knows that."

And we looked at each other and gazed on the green meadow over which the cool evening was running just then, and we wept together. But then life was dearer to me than all my wisdom ever was.

Thus spoke Zarathustra.

Friedrich Nietzsche
Thus Spoke Zarathustra
Third Part
Footnotes

All notes refer to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche.


Devotedness. — There are noble women with a certain poverty of spirit, who, in order to express their profoundest devotedness have no other alternative but to offer their virtue and modesty; it is the highest thing they have. And this present is often accepted without putting the recipient under such deep obligation as the giver supposed, — a very melancholy story!


The Antichrist, p. 167.


The Joyful Wisdom, p. 102.

Human, All-too-human, Part I, p. 314.


Beyond Good and Evil, p. 169.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 178.


Human, All-too-human, Part I, p. 305.

Human, All-too-human, Part I, p. 304.


36. See Appendix


38. *Ecce Homo*, p. 266.
Bibliography


