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## **Nineteenth-century positivism on women, degeneration and sexual difference: Frederick Harrison's *The Emancipation of Women***

„Sooner or later women rarely fail to learn the all-powerful effect of feminine tears, and often succeed, by dint of much practice, in calling them up almost at will. How many cases have been observed, in which women had the faculty of passing from smiles to sorrow and of weeping, with every appearance of real grief, from one moment to the next”.

Cesare Lombroso, *The Physical Insensibility of Woman*

“«If women don't want to be men, what do they want?» asked the Bawling Brotherhood when the first misgiving of the truth flashed upon them; and then, to reassure themselves, they pointed to a certain sort of woman in proof of the contention that we were all unsexing ourselves”.

Sarah Grand, *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*

“Man is man and woman is woman. That was the order of creation and it must so remain. It is idle to compare the sexes in similar things. It is a question of difference...”.

Ella W. Winston, *Foibles of the New Woman*

This essay, devoted to 19<sup>th</sup> century positivist discourse on the emancipation of women, begins with a sketch of the Victorians' particular dedication to the notion of difference and its importance for the preservation of the

social order. This notion came to be tirelessly exploited in the face of what Elaine Showalter has memorably called “sexual anarchy”, a *fin-de-siècle* climate of confusion which seriously threatened to dissolve the supposedly natural, and paradigmatic, differences between men and women. Within the various attempts to chronicle how people differ, biological science took to elaborating on the innate and hence ineradicable variations between the sexes in order to account for gender roles which were perceived as a direct and unavoidable result of biology. Scientists set out to prove women’s inferiority (physical and consequently intellectual) which was the cost women paid for their reproductive function. Claimed to be physically, and consequently intellectually, incapable of serious exertion, women were said to mirror the characteristics of female animals, both lower and higher. This biological research was exploited by social discourse, an example of which is Frederick Harrison’s<sup>1</sup> *The Emancipation of Women*. A text which manifests how the findings of biology and claims made by social discourse permeate each other, it celebrates women’s inherent weakness and posits sexual difference as an outcome and condition of evolution. Indeed, the progress of civilisation depends on the organic difference between women and men, yet the possibility of degenerating into a state of barbarism may always arise if women attempt, against nature, to transcend their assigned role. Held responsible for the potential descent of man, women are, at the same time, eulogised for their lofty spiritual tasks of disseminating emotions and feelings across the realm of civilisation. The abundantly, infinitely emotional woman must never cease at the production of love lest she should instigate the process of degeneration which, in Harrison’s rhetoric, amounts to *degenderation* (Barbara Spackman’s term), a loss of distinctive qualities which make up genders. Such undesirable downfall will bring to the fore an uncivilised abortive man, that is, a woman who lacks in what constitutes a true man and therefore remains useless. It will also, ultimately, degrade man to the position of a female, for stripped of the civilising manly garb that shapes his masculinity, he comes to be revealed as body/physiology.

In the opening paragraphs of her essay *Literature and Degeneration: The Representation of ‘Decadence’*, Sandra Siegel writes:

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Harrison (1831–1923), a writer and a propagator of August Comte’s positivism. He was one of the leaders of the English Comtists and a supporter of the Trade Unions. He held a strong conviction about “social improvement” and believed that it was the family not the individual that constituted the “smallest substantive organism” of society (see J. E. Chamberlin, *Images of Degeneration: Turnings and Transformations*, in *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, (eds.) J. E. Chamberlin and S. L. Gilman, New York 1985). He also engaged in social criticism and enjoyed a high position in letters, expressing his opinions on art and literature, for example, in *The Decadence of Romance*, (*Forum*, 1894) and *Art and Shoddy: A reply to Criticism*, (*Forum*, 1894) – (see S. Siegel, *Literature and Degeneration: The Representation of ‘Decadence’*, in Chamberlin and Gilman, *Ibidem*).

It is questionable whether any single idea can be said to have dominated any age, as Mill thought 'comparing' had dominated modernity. Darwin's *Origin* (published within two decades of Mill's essay) demonstrated considerably greater scrutiny than simple acts of comparison. We can be certain, though, that during the second half of the century classification and comparison, kindred activities increased. Kindred, but not identical: unlike the more detached act of classifying, the act of comparing, when exercised habitually, usually elicits judgements. By 1900, the Victorians had placed nearly every act, whether social or literary, on one or another side of a great divide. No matter was too small for scrutiny. They evaluated. They took positions. No matter was too large. While the social scientists celebrated how far contemporary civilisation had advanced, social and literary critics lamented how far civilisation had declined. ... It is worth recalling Ruskin's remark of the 1860 that 'progress and decline' were 'strangely mixed in the modern mind.' That 'mix' became stranger as the Victorians classified events according to their power to carry them forward or cast them backward in time<sup>2</sup>.

If, indeed, comparing came to filter through much of the nineteenth-century thought, as Sandra Siegel argues, becoming its governing principle, it no doubt must have brought to the foreground the notions of difference without which comparisons of whatever kind could not be drawn. It was, Siegel argues, the difference between progress and decline which underlay Victorian acts of comparing, and into which other differences were neatly inscribed. This difference, too, provided ample room for all sorts of "accounts of decadence"<sup>3</sup>, decadence which was always to be found in the various manifestations of decline understood as a failure to either keep up with progress or to ever embark on its path. The fundamental distinction into "the primitive past and the present"<sup>4</sup> on which anthropologists like James Frazer relied in order to formulate their theories of civilisation as (masculine) advancement<sup>5</sup>, reflected a larger need of "preserving the concept of difference", as the dissolution of definite boundaries remained a potential hazard<sup>6</sup>. Differences that helped distinguish savagery from civilisation played, Siegel shows, a distinctly ideological role:

the more fully the social scientists amplified the differences that separated 'Them' from 'Us,' the more readily could they congratulate themselves on the progress of civilisation: Modern western man was physically, mentally,

<sup>2</sup> S. Siegel, *Literature and Degeneration: The Representation of 'Decadence'*, *Ibidem*, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Frazer borrows the notion that civilisation and progress were inherently masculine from Charles Darwin (that is, from his *The Descent of Man*). Siegel, *Ibidem*, pp. 203–204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 201–202.

and morally superior; his social arrangements and institutions were more complex; his religion and his science were more advanced<sup>7</sup>.

The more the differences were stressed and thus discerned, the more visible the progress of civilization became. These instances of differentiation evoked (white, middle-class) man as the most civilised and advanced creature on earth with whom all others were ceaselessly compared and proved inferior. Inferiority became a concept capacious enough to accommodate all sorts of 'Them' who were both a vivid illustration of the achievements of civilisation and an image of regression that loomed on the horizon of the civilised world:

Children, the mad, and women were constant reminders of the condition from which civilisation had evolved and to which civilisation could revert. Adult and manlike behaviour were salient signs of progress. But the threat remained: adults could become like children; men could become like women<sup>8</sup>.

Yet whatever pairing was at stake (Siegel provides a long list of them) it had its origin in a "more inclusive difference that distinguished men from women"<sup>9</sup>. Thus sexual difference came to define the notion of difference as such, becoming a difference *par excellence*. Social critics, borrowing from Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, made a regular and generous use of the opposition male/female as they attempted to sketch the notions of decadence<sup>10</sup>. Aligned with beastliness in Darwin's account, woman stood for what was opposed to civilisation. Since "civilisation" and "masculinity" functioned as "conceptual cognates"<sup>11</sup>, cultural discourse was inevitably gendered. Decadence was envisioned as a regressive movement to a more "primitive" condition that, within the logic deployed by various writers, was more or less directly represented by woman and the feminine<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Siegel continues: "For Frazer and others the clearest sign that civilisation had indeed approached the threshold of far-reaching advance was the development of the science of anthropology, the latest example of civilisation. The immediate practical gain of an otherwise recondite subject was not negligible: turning to the savage was a means of reassuring contemporary culture of how far it had advanced. The further back in time one travelled, the further civilisation could be said to have progressed". *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 203–204.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

<sup>12</sup> As Siegel writes, Darwin's *The Descent of Man* dealt to a large extent with differences between men and women (to the disadvantage of the latter) that were easily translated into other differences: "the same qualities Darwin ascribes to men (as opposed to women) are also those that separate man from beast". p. 204.

As Susan Sleeth Mosedale's discussion in her article *Science Corrupted: Victorian Biologists Consider 'The Woman Question'* shows, scientific discourse of the late nineteenth century was rather busy exploring the male/female difference, producing conclusive and copious biological evidence in support of social inequalities between men and women<sup>13</sup>. The "scientific method" lent particular credibility to all disciplines to which it was applied, granting itself full authority in determining the limits of proper gender behaviour and capacities. Anthropometry, physiology, and evolution provided a language with which to explain and justify women's traditional position as well as the unreasonableness of women's claims to emancipation. As was conclusively stated: "What was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament"<sup>14</sup>. Scientists searched the natural world to look for inherent attributes of the sexes that were to confirm that "the human female's role of homemaker and child nurturer was the *necessary* continuation of an evolutionary trend observable in lower and higher animals"<sup>15</sup>.

Measurements of various body parts became a necessary component of scientific research and the brain came under careful scrutiny. Predictably, women's brain was proved to be smaller than men's (a fact which followed an observable, and thus indisputable truth that women's bodies were smaller than men's), "a five-ounce difference"<sup>16</sup> being a factor which accounted for her lesser reasoning abilities. The power of reason was thus seen as depending upon the size of the brain, the ampleness of which guaranteed the ampleness of thought. Not only was women's brain undersized, but there was no hope it might miraculously grow because, according to Lamarckian mechanism and its logic, organs out of use did not develop but degenerated<sup>17</sup>. Shortcutting from reproductive organs to the brain, scientists reasoned women needed to store their energies for reproduction

<sup>13</sup> S. Sleeth Mosedale, *Science Corrupted: Victorian Biologists Consider 'The Woman Question'*, "Journal of the History of Biology" 1978, no. 1.

<sup>14</sup> P. Geddes and J. A. Thomson, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Mosedale, *ibidem*, p. 5. Francis Galton, for instance, the 'father' of eugenics, claimed that "women share a common psychological ancestress with the female butterfly". *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> This detail comes from G. J. Romanes, an evolutionist, physiologist and comparative psychologist, and author of *Mental Differences between Men and Women*, Mosedale, *Ibidem*, pp. 16–17. The issue of brain-weight differences was dealt with in a truly acrobatic brainwork as scientists took great pains to prove, no matter how, men's superior intellectual powers. Though women's brain was described as lighter than men's, it was nonetheless discovered, to the disappointment of some scientists, that it "was relatively heavier when compared with body weight (6 percent heavier, according to one calculation). This realisation soon led to the desperate devising of yet other indexes which might again support the intellectual superiority of the male: one Manouvrier actually compared the weight of the brain with the weight of the thigh bone, while a Sutherland compared it with body height". Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

since the economy of her body provided for a finite amount of energy and only one form for its outlet, that is, her reproductive system. In the closed system that her body was seen to be, the spending of energy that was misdirected was a reckless squandering always at the cost of a life she might have brought into the world<sup>18</sup>.

The widely held view of women's mental inferiority (persistently linked to, and resulting from, the frailty of her small body), which was "traced back through evolutionary history to the lower animals"<sup>19</sup>, led scientists like Romanes to argue that their "natural inequality"<sup>20</sup> intensified with time and could only become greater. While the five-ounce difference might be made up for over centuries, men's brain would, in the meantime, grow too. Woman was thus bound to lag behind men despite reforms in women's education<sup>21</sup>. Since in terms of her mental capacities, she "inherits a greater disability" from her animal ancestresses<sup>22</sup>, her brain, alongside its small size, was "less able to sustain the fatigue of serious or prolonged brain action"<sup>23</sup>. Biologically, then, woman is not predisposed to any action, whether physical or mental. Her body and her brain cannot sustain exertion which requires strength that she obviously does not have. Defined in terms of "physical weakness" and "feebleness of will"<sup>24</sup>, woman rightly occupies (the simplicity of) the home, the non-civilised and non-civilisable sphere of disability.

*The Evolution of Sex*, a book on scientific theories of sexual difference published in 1889 and written by two biologists, Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, was an attempt – grounded in evolutionary thought – to explain differentiations between the sexes. The authors concentrated on innate characteristics of males and females and traced them back "to lower and higher organisms"<sup>25</sup>. What Geddes and Thomson found out in their

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<sup>18</sup> E. Drinker Cope, American zoologist, vertebrate paleontologist, and neo-Lamarckian evolutionist, argued in a similar vein that in women "maternal duties have fostered, likewise in Lamarckian fashion, their emotional development at the expense of their intellectual growth". Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Romanes, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, scientists like Romanes did not oppose women's education but attempted to prove its futility. Women might educate themselves provided they "recognize[d] that they [could] not be mentally like men". Romanes turns to nature to explain the inevitability of the inequality between the sexes, placing, simultaneously, this inequality beyond reform: "the laws of evolution having effected the male's physical and mental superiority, this 'natural and fundamental distinction of sex' is immune to influence by education. Women's contribution to 'the social organism' is to complement man, not to become his 'unnatural copy'." Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Cope, *The Relation of the Sexes to Government*, (1888), quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Romanes, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Romanes, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

classificatory research was that female animals are “larger, more passive, vegetative, and conservative”<sup>26</sup>, while “males are smaller, more active, of higher body temperature, and shorter lived”<sup>27</sup>. According to Geddes and Thomson, these differences were a direct manifestation of cell metabolism – anabolism and katabolism. Thus male cells were held to be katabolic which amounted to an active spending of energy, while female cells were anabolic, that is, conserving energy<sup>28</sup>. This katabolic/anabolic theory of sexual difference accounted for a number of traits traditionally considered as either masculine or feminine. The most obvious conclusion of this metabolic variation was that men were naturally active and women naturally passive. This scientifically verified fact was given visible evidence as the body testified to the difference at stake: “Masculine energy expenditure and feminine lethargy are reflected in body size: just as the sperm is smaller than the ovum, so the male is smaller than the more ‘sluggish’ female”<sup>29</sup>. In Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, this sluggishness is, too, linked with the production of energy but the disparity in its amount results from the fact that “women exhale less carbonic acid in proportion to their body weights than men do”<sup>30</sup>.

Woman’s “sluggish metabolic constitution,” which entails a number of psychological tendencies<sup>31</sup>, is convincingly represented by her reproductive organs. Her ovum, sedentary and slow in contrast to the energetic and speedy sperm, is clearly a microscopic summary and an image of woman. This correspondence foregrounds yet another difference: unlike man, whose proto-form (that is, the sperm) signals smallness as his representation and condition of his origin, woman is correlated with ampleness. Not only because the ovum displays a certain abundance in relation to the sperm which is seen as the norm, but also because females originate in anabolic conditions of “abundant and rich nutrition”<sup>32</sup>. Hence, according to Geddes and Thomson, “females with small placenta and little menstruation bear more boys”<sup>33</sup>. Thus males abide in the little, a propitious condition for the masculine. Woman, on the other hand, offers infinite abundance to be con-

<sup>26</sup> Geddes and Thomson, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Among them: “altruistic emotions”, “constancy of affection”, “sympathy”, “continuous patience”, Geddes and Thomson, quoted in *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 33. Geddes and Thomson extend this line of thought to economic circumstances claiming that there are more females among the well-off and in towns, whereas boys are more often born among the poor and in the country. Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Geddes and Thomson, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 34.

sumed in an act of sharing away what she naturally has<sup>34</sup>. Since “biological differences” lead directly to “psychological and social differentiations”, Geddes and Thomson argued that “we must insist upon the biological [that is, physiological] considerations underlying the relations of sexes”<sup>35</sup>.

In a less scientific, though by no means less authoritative, way, Fred-eric Harrison, in his article *The Emancipation of Women* published in the *Fortnightly Review*, elaborates on constitutive differences between men and women in order to argue against the threatening dissolution of the social order and the unsettling confusion of gender roles<sup>36</sup>. Harrison’s essay is an example of how scientific findings and assumptions made their way into social discourse. In Harrison’s argument, women are persistently evoked as an embodiment of (biological) weakness<sup>37</sup> which should be heeded and honoured for the sake of Humanity’s<sup>38</sup> good. This weakness, which becomes invalidism in the case of pregnant women<sup>39</sup>, is a major obstacle in women’s attempts to move out of the home in search for occupations other than motherhood and housewifery<sup>40</sup>. Ruminating on their bodies, from brain through “nervous organisation”<sup>41</sup> to womb, Harrison carefully metes out functions and roles both women and men are to play in society.

A self-proclaimed positivist, Harrison explains at the beginning that “Positivism is, in the true and noble sense of that term, profoundly conservative”, and, therefore, “it seeks to purify and spiritualise the great social institutions – not to materialise them or annihilate them”<sup>42</sup>. These “institutions of Humanity”<sup>43</sup>, marriage and family among them<sup>44</sup>, may stand a chance of survival and cultivation once they follow what Harrison calls

<sup>34</sup> Commenting on Geddes and Thomson, Mosedale writes: “The union of sperm with egg results when the hungry sperm pursues the egg as a source of nourishment; the egg, being amply supplied with food, is less disposed to the chase”. *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Geddes and Thomson, quoted in Mosedale, *Ibidem*, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> F. Harrison, *The Emancipation of Women*, “The Fortnightly Review” July-December, 1891.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Harrison, *Ibidem*, pp. 441–442.

<sup>38</sup> Harrison himself capitalises this word.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison writes: “no mother could deny that, for months she had been a simple invalid”. *Ibidem*, p. 444.

<sup>40</sup> The concluding sentence of the essay reads: “Let us then honour the old-world image of Woman as being relieved by man from the harder tasks of industry, from the defence and management of the State, in order that she may set herself to train up each generation to be worthier than the last, and may make each home in some sense a heaven of peace on earth”. *Ibidem*, 452.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 446.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 440.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Others include: “the Domestic education, Political Government, Nations, the appropriation of capital, the differentiation of social functions, the influence of a spiritual authority, the transmission of ideas, of materials, of memories, the diverse offices of the sexes, the tendency to continual differentiation, along with a collateral tendency to union and organisation by common beliefs and venerations”. *Ibidem*, p. 440.



“their normal issue”<sup>45</sup>. Positivism, therefore, embarks on a conservative task of preserving the institutions which make use of, appreciate and recognize the “differences of sex” without which they cannot continue. Thus Harrison, mouthpiece of the positivist thought, pleads that to blur these differences would be “disastrous to human civilisation”<sup>46</sup>. The disaster has to do with “assimilation and uniformity”<sup>47</sup> which aim to “equalise the sexes”<sup>48</sup> and hence to shatter the foundational quality of the differences. Recognising the importance of “all womanly ideals” – which due to “the fever of public ambitions” are in danger of evaporation – Harrison offers a set of recipes with which to prevent the social order from disintegrating. Assuming the position of a teacher, he admonishes men to “teach them [women] that this specious agitation must ultimately degrade them, sterilize them, unsex them”<sup>49</sup>.

Granted this pedagogic task of teaching ignorant women the consequences of their emancipation, men figure in Harrison’s argument as the guardians of the solidity of social institutions. “We, Positivists”<sup>50</sup>, scattered abundantly in Harrison’s text, becomes an anti-revolutionary subject speaking a concerted and magisterial voice of concern:

But when a great social institution is seriously threatened we must deal with the real revolutionists who have a consistent aim and mean what they say. And the real revolutionists aim at the total “emancipation” of women, and by this they mean that law, custom, convention, and public opinion shall leave every adult woman free to do whatever any adult man is free to do, and without let or reproach, to live in any way, adopt any habit, follow any pursuit, and undertake any duty, public or private, which is open to or reserved to men<sup>51</sup>.

In this call to arms Harrison recognises that the real revolutionists’ talk is no prattle. Dangerously close to materialisation, it promises to flesh out (give substance, bring into the real) what might otherwise safely remain within the unrealities of mere talk. The imperative to deal with the insurgents amounts to more than an attempt to prevent the violation of “a paramount law of human nature”.<sup>52</sup> The threat that women will emanci-

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 440.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 450.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 440.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 441.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 451.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 447.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 450.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 448.

pate themselves out of difference and into the realm meant solely for men becomes a fear of women trespassing, with impunity, upon the clearly delineated, safeguarded and closed territory of privilege which thus needs to be defended. It is evident that women have no access to what is “reserved to men” and that what is at stake in their emancipation is their appropriation of this reservoir of liberty and power. Therefore, Harrison’s objection to revolutionists is not so much about women becoming totally emancipated but about women claiming what does not belong, by biological and hence social right, to them, about women straying out of bounds of the domestic sphere. As Sandra Siegel aptly notices, “from Harrison’s point of view (...) gender differences, marked according to a moral hierarchy, were congruent with privilege and power”<sup>53</sup>. Thus the dissolution of these differences inevitably meant an end to this hierarchy and also an end to the idea of absolute difference which was reinforcing, and reinforced by, separate spheres. This is why Harrison goes to great lengths to argue sex difference beyond change and mitigation.

In his nauseating exposition of women’s difference from men, Harrison reiterates most of the popular scientific commonplaces of the time<sup>54</sup>. Couched in a Ruskinian sentiment and dramatised language this celebration of difference addresses biology as an irrefutable point of reference and a lasting foundation of social functions:

The root of the matter is that the social function of women is essentially different from that of men. What is this function? It is personal, direct, domestic; working rather through sympathy than through action, equally intellectual as that of men, but acting more through the imagination, and less through logic. We start from this – neither exaggerating the difference, nor denying it, but resting in the organic difference between woman and man. It is proved by all sound biology, by the biology both of man and of the entire animal series. It is proved also by the history of civilisation, and the entire course of human evolution. ... It is a difference of nature, I say, an organic difference, alike in body, in mind, in feeling, and in character – a difference which it is the part of evolution to develop and not to destroy, as it is always the part of evolution to develop organic differences and not to produce their artificial assimilation. ... The thing which concerns us is to hold fast by the organic difference implanted by Nature between Man and Woman, in body, in mind, in feeling, and in energy, without any possibility of talking of higher and lower, of better or of worse. Fully to work out the whole meaning of this difference in all its details, would involve a complete

<sup>53</sup> S. Siegel, *Literature and Degeneration*..., p. 213.

<sup>54</sup> Or, as Mosedale points out, it was science that reiterated the proverbial natures of both women and men adapting their research findings to them.

education in Anthropology and Ethics, and nothing but the bare heads of the subject can here be noticed. It begins with the difference in physical organisation – the condition, and, no doubt in one sense, the antecedent (I do not say the cause) of every other difference<sup>55</sup>.

The obviousness of this difference, which according to Harrison barely merits repetition, has been threatened by “social anarchy” that is “eager to throw it all aside”<sup>56</sup>. Crediting himself with a mission of reminding society of the indisputable goodness that issues forth from this Nature-designed “essential difference”, Harrison uses sweeping and powerful arguments which summon up the noble origins and the irreversible development of the organic difference. Its inception constitutes not only the beginning of history but also an enabling condition for the emergence of processes such as evolution and civilisation. Placed as a foundation of humanity and animal world alike, this difference is also deployed in Harrison’s text both as a marker and a requisite of evolutionary achievement. “The entire course of human evolution” would not have been a direct progression towards excellence had it not been for the organic difference. Harrison implies that without this difference civilisation would (will) be arrested and the human race would (will) not move beyond the state of “barbarism”<sup>57</sup>. Disguising patriarchal rule as a divine order that secures the progress of civilisation and cannot be intervened, he places the essential difference in the hands of evolution which best determines its development. The emancipation of women, Harrison then argues, is going in a wrong direction because it ignores the nature of this difference which universally and instinctively<sup>58</sup> is and has always been.

In Harrison’s elaboration of sexual difference, woman is by far more superior than man<sup>59</sup>. His eulogies of women’s superiority and nobility hail women as an irreplaceable body of affection at the forefront of human progress, a body that leads and guides humanity towards a glorious eminence securing its moral well-being. Women, he assures loftily, “are placing themselves as a true spiritual force in the vanguard of human evolution”<sup>60</sup>. Affording women a vanguard position on the field of civilisation, Harri-

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<sup>55</sup> Harrison, *The Emancipation of Women*, pp. 442–443. In what follows Harrison enumerates these differences, all to be found in scientific texts of the time.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 447.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 444.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 447.

<sup>59</sup> Harrison writes, for example: “And if a million housewives do not equal one Cromwell, they no doubt add more to the happiness of their own generation”. *Ibidem*, p. 447.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 447.

son credits them with a natural disposition to “perpetually [offer]”<sup>61</sup> what they have/are at their disposal. The superior power of her contribution lies in the dissemination of feelings grounded in what Harrison calls “animal instinct”<sup>62</sup>. Harrison both suggests that woman is somewhat outside the humanity she keeps spiritualising and is also convinced that the instinct she houses “possesses” her, in P. B. Shelly’s words, “from the cradle to the grave”<sup>63</sup>, implying thus that she is fully controlled by an innate impulse originating in her body. Woman’s body, therefore, keeps offering what essentially eludes words speaking a wordless parlance which needs no voice for its articulation. She performs the supreme function of “purifying” and “humanising” society “in daily contact and in unspoken language”<sup>64</sup>, a mute touching figure of the domestic everyday, who through her “sympathetic touch”<sup>65</sup> and all her body’s eloquence “[diffuses] the spirit of affection” and “all the incommunicable graces of woman’s tenderness”<sup>66</sup>.

Woman is, in Harrison’s account, “the spontaneous and inexhaustible fountain of love”<sup>67</sup>, a perennial source of tender sentiment that naturally, and as it were despite her<sup>68</sup>, keeps issuing forth. She is a well of benign affection that nourishes “every husband, father, son, or brother”<sup>69</sup>, thirsty and avid for “a higher civilisation”<sup>70</sup>. This metaphor of the profusion of feminine emotion, which she can give freely away without ever running dry, sums up the essence of womanhood whose social mission is an infinite production and circulation of tender feelings. At the same time, she is a place of origination, a source of vital feelings, “the earliest, most organic, most universal of all the innate forces of mankind”<sup>71</sup>, that nurtures society into existence. This abundance of love constitutes, according to Harrison, “the grand and central difference between the sexes”<sup>72</sup>, a difference which makes a difference without which “step[ping] out of barbarism”<sup>73</sup> is downright impossible. Describing woman in terms of a fountain which in a way liquefies her body into a flow of emotions Harrison addresses the economy

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 445.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 445. P. B. Shelly, *A Song: ‘Men of England’*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 446.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 445.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 446.

<sup>68</sup> Harrison writes: “the nature of Woman is stimulated and controlled by affection”. *Ibidem*, p. 445.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 446.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 445.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 446.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

of abundance that woman comes to embody as a fountain-pen scripting wordlessly the emotional texture of humanity.

Given the indispensable role woman plays as a diffuser that provides affection on end and regular basis, it is not surprising that Harrison argues against what he sees as threatening to this “womanliness of woman”<sup>74</sup> and to society as a whole. In Harrison’s essay, the vision of the downfall of civilisation materialises as a deplorable instance of, in Barbara Spackman’s words taken slightly out of the context, degeneration<sup>75</sup>, which here bespeaks a confusion of genders, a loss of what clearly and indubitably defines women (and, consequently men), a failure to fit into categories of the masculine and the feminine. In fact, degeneration and degeneration emerge in Harrison as synonymous ideas both signalling a falling away into the pit of barbarism, a “wigwam”<sup>76</sup> of de-essentialised difference where woman strips off her homely feminine garb to reveal a body outside civilisation, a body of an “abortive man”<sup>77</sup>.

Degen(d)eration amounts to and brings about a pulverisation of society, which, turned to dust, no longer retains its integrity but instead undergoes a reduction to a decomposed, disorganised heap of individuals:

It [Comte’s teaching] holds firmly the middle ground between the base apathy which is satisfied with the actual condition of woman as it is, and the restless materialism which would assimilate, as far as possible, the distinctive functions of women to those of men, which would ‘equalise the sexes’ in the spirit of justice, as they phrase it, and would pulverise the social groups of families, sexes, and professions into individuals organised, if at all, by unlimited resort to the ballot box<sup>78</sup>.

Assimilation to men gives rise to a de-gendered woman who, no longer a womanly woman and not quite a man either, hovers somewhere between the two as a sterile and thus useless being. Harrison repeatedly sounds the keynote of what he at one point calls “androgynous ignorance”<sup>79</sup>, women’s blind desire to imitate men that leads to gender ambiguity as a result of equalisation of the sexes. What Harrison’s remark implies is that there is something in this futile attempt that women do not know, and what one needs to know to be a man. Manhood and manliness, unlike womanhood

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 448.

<sup>75</sup> B. Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio*, Ithaca and London 1989.

<sup>76</sup> Harrison, *The Emancipation...*, p. 446.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 452.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 441.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 444.

and womanliness, require an arcane knowledge which women do not have and cannot claim<sup>80</sup>. Where women are best at knowing, however, is their own unknowing – “every true woman knows that women are, by the law of nature, unfit”<sup>81</sup>.

A frightening vision of a “mannish” woman who has lost her feminine attributes and her “home-like beauty”<sup>82</sup>, and thus become an “imitation man,” appears as a warning against “absolute assimilation” that will bring about a retreat into animalism:

Women must choose to be either women or abortive men. They cannot be both women and men. When men and women are once started as competitors in the same fierce race, as rivals and opponents, instead of companions and help mates, with the same habits, the same ambitions, the same engrossing toil and the same public lives, Woman will have disappeared, society will consist of individuals distinguished physiologically, as are horses or dogs, into male and female specimens<sup>83</sup>.

As Siegel sums it up succinctly, “women’s duties, Harrison argued, were neither to compete with men in professions, to participate in public life beside them, nor to engage in the strenuous labor required by work outside of the home”<sup>84</sup>. Interestingly, the degen(d)eration of society is rendered in a rather dramatic form, imaged as a disappearing woman, a woman leaving the scene of progressing civilisation and civilised society. Capitalising the word, Harrison not only addresses, and honours, what he calls “the old-world image”<sup>85</sup>, but he also suggests that the capital “w” is what raises woman above physiology and what keeps sameness at bay. Moreover, the fall from Woman to female seems particularly painful and undesirable as, within Harrison’s logic, it involves man’s fall to the same degraded position, a position that is female-like because of its naturalness unmediated by the civilising process. It is, then, interesting to notice how the emphatic repetition of “the same” progresses towards the physiological to finally culminate with a reversal of the sameness. If we concede women’s demands, Harrison seems to be saying, we will have to accept the fact that, ultimately, it will be men becoming the same as women in the sense of a reduction to biology, which in Victorian science and social discourse, is reserved for

<sup>80</sup> Harrison, for instance, knows perfectly well what it means to be a true woman.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 444.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 448.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 452.

<sup>84</sup> Siegel, *Literature and Degeneration...*, p. 211.

<sup>85</sup> Harrison, *The Emancipation...*, p. 452.

women only. Thus the fall from Woman to female is at the same time a fall from man to female, to a condition where physiology becomes man's only point of reference. Thus what Harrison presents to us is an instance of degen(d)eration that wears a decidedly female garb.

Despite her emotional strength and power, the superiority of which Harrison, somewhat suspiciously, repeatedly assures his readers, woman is still posited as a weakling that needs to be unburdened<sup>86</sup> of the more strenuous public responsibilities the better to perform her saintly, homely duties. Ultimately, Harrison employs an effective argument resorting to a precise scientific method of calculation. What debilitates woman's "maximum working capacity" is "a five per cent of periodical unfitness" caused by "seasons of prostration"<sup>87</sup> grounded in her physiological constitution. This insurmountable barrier, like the scientists' five-ounce difference in brain size, forever disqualifies women from participating in what Harrison calls "industrial, professional, and public careers"<sup>88</sup>.

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi

**Dziewiętnastowieczny pozytywizm o kobietach, degeneracji i różnicy płci:  
Fredericka Harrisona *Emancypacja kobiet***

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi interpretację eseju Fredericka Harrisona (*The Emancipation of Women*) z 1891 roku opublikowanego na łamach *The Fortnightly Review*. Swój wywód rozpoczynam od krótkiego szkicu na temat znaczenia, jakie Wiktoria nie przypisywali różnicy między kobietą i mężczyzną, koncentrując się na naukach biologicznych, których odkrycia i założenia znalazły odzwierciedlenia w dyskursie społecznym. Nie dziwi więc fakt, że Harrison opiera swoją argumentację na założeniu o niekwestionowanej różnicy biologicznej i wynikających z niej rolach społecznych oraz przekonuje czytelnika, że to właśnie od niej zależy postęp cywilizacji. Degeneracja, którą autor ten pojmuję jako popadnięcie w stan barbarzyństwa, i która jest skutkiem naruszenia różnicy płciowej, w retoryce Harrisona przyjmuje formę tego, co nazywam za Barbarą Spackman, „degeneration”, powiedzmy odrodzajowieniem. U Harrisona oznacza to utratę tego, co stanowi o istocie kobiecości

<sup>86</sup> Harrison writes in the concluding sentence of his essay: "Let us then honour the old-world image of Woman as being relieved by man from the harder tasks of industry, from the defence and management of the State, in order that she may set herself to train up each generation to be worthier than the last, and may make each home in some sense a heaven of peace of earth". *Ibidem*, p. 452.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 444.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*.

i męskości, a także feminizację mężczyzny, dokonującą się poprzez jego zniżenie się do poziomu ciała i fizjologii. Degeneracja utożsamiona zostaje tutaj z to-samością, choć paradoksalnie, to nie wizja kobiet dorównujących mężczyznom, ale wizja mężczyzn równających się z kobietami oznacza ziszczenie się wizji degeneracji społeczeństwa.