Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth Century Australia

Jill Julius Matthews

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In *Good and Mad Women* Jill Julius Matthews sets out to map the landscape of Australian femininity in the twentieth century. Her concern is 'to understand the specific meaning and experience of becoming a woman in twentieth century Australia, to analyse the civilization that produces us, to uncover the peculiar circumstances in and from which we have made ourselves.' At the heart of the book are the 'captured biographies', the casenotes of sixty women who were treated in Glenside Hospital, a local state hospital in South Australia, between 1945 and 1970. The meaning of these casenotes, records of the patients kept by the hospital staff, is explored in relation to the definitions of femininity available in the society, whether in terms of demographic parameters, economic opportunities or ideological imperatives.

In many ways the story seems very familiar to the story that has gradually been opened up by British feminist historians of hidden and misunderstood aspects of British culture: in the economy, the relative invisibility of women in the formal sectors until the 1950s; the place of trade unions in marginalizing women's work; the idea and the practice of the 'family wage'; ideologically, the stress on mothering, and the place of the 'experts' whether in health, education or welfare in regulating maternal practices. But there are crucial differences too; differences which highlight the historical specificity of the Australian experience of advanced industrial capitalism and the particular contradictions raised for women.

Take the demographic data, for example, which illustrates the statistical as well as the cultural dominance of men in Australian society up to 1914, an imbalance which meant that in some respects women were highly valued. Or the fact that non-Aboriginal Australia has always been a migrant society and that migrants (with the exception of domestic servants and female dependants) have been defined as men. The overriding concern with population which resulted from this produced, Jill Julius Matthews argues, a common sense preoccupied with the need for a large, healthy and racially pure population – themes that were clearly present in British society in the early twentieth century but never with the same level of significance or power. The consequent emphasis on women as mothers contributed to the dominance of heterosexuality and marriage as the only proper expressions of both femininity and female sexuality. Only in the last twenty years, she maintains, has this popular ideology been replaced by one which focuses on permissive consumerism, claims that self-fulfilment can be bought in the marketplace and argues against

moral and legal restrictions on personal behaviour. Such rampant individualism, fostered by the conditions of mid to late twentieth-century consumer capitalism, has allowed for the emergence of women's sexuality as a site of struggle, and also, presumably, for the development of contemporary feminism.

The discussion of the structural determinants of women's lives provides the framework for the interpretation of the experiential material found in the casenotes. Jill Julius Matthews starts from the premise that femininity is an impossible and contradictory goal and that women share an inevitable sense of failure because they cannot achieve it. She uses the 'captured biographies' of these women who either defined themselves or were defined by their families as unable to function normally, suffering from 'behavioural disorder' in the language of the hospital, to explore the cruel and difficult character of the demands placed upon women. The refusal of non-monogamous sexuality, the non-recognition of the work women do, the level of guilt and blame women carry for 'inadequate mothering' can all make women ill, and indeed make women mad. Drawing on the anti-psychiatry tradition, she defines certain types of madness as the deviation from social norms and argues that psychiatry is chiefly interested in the maintenance of existing gender relations, the 'curing' of deviations and the restoration of normality – the reconstruction of good wives and good mothers.

Both these definitions and the use of the casenotes raised some questions for me. I would have welcomed a longer discussion of the issues around sanity and madness, a recognition of the argument that madness has its own structures and dynamics which cannot always be explained in terms of labelling and deviancy. Similarly, there seem to me to be difficulties in taking

material such as the casenotes as representative of the extremes of ordinary women's experience. I wanted to know more of the individual women, more of the internal dynamics of their relationships with their parents, their husbands, their children, and, indeed, their doctors and social workers. I missed any psychoanalytic dimension, any recognition of unconscious processes, and found that the relentless return to the social marginalized the subjective ways in which each woman makes her way in the world.

One further problem relates to the use of the casenotes. Jill Julius Matthews reflects at the end of her book that, for her, the restrictions, denials and lack of real choices for women have been the most salient features of the Australian landscape. Necessarily this sense has been confirmed by the histories of the individual women patients she has looked at. Different kinds of sources – women's autobiographies and diaries, women's poetry and fiction, women's record of involvement in trade unions, feminist organizations or even churches and chapels – would have reflected different voices, and emphasized women's resistance and power – their capacity to find ways for themselves despite the weight of structural determinants. Indeed, these determinants are not only made by men: it would be fascinating to know, for example, what part women played in creating the popular ideologies around population, as writers, as social workers, as experts and managers themselves. In starting to map out the field, however, Jill Julius Matthews has begun to explore the maze of Australian femininity, to open up questions, to raise both theoretical and historical issues. *Good and Mad Women* is an essential starting point for British readers into the rapidly extending world of Australian feminist history.

Catherine Hall