Penelope's Web :SOME PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN EUROPEAN AND CANADIAN SOCIETY. N.E.S. Griffiths. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976. Pp. 249.

Penelope, you may remember, was the wife of Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, who went off to the Trojan Wars and stayed away, travelling,for twenty years. When Odysseus, so long absent, was taken for dead, a mob of importunate suitors, with an eye to Odysseus' title and wealth, as well as his wife's beauty, descended on Penelope, demanding that she choose a new husband from among them. Hard pressed, Penelope told the suitors she could not make the choice until she had finished the shroud she was weaving for her aged father-in-law. For three years, she put off the decision by unravelling by night what she had woven by day. The suitors detected the ruse, but Penelope was eventually rescued by the return of Odysseus. Penelope's Web, as the never-finished shroud is called, is the title Naomi Griffiths has given to her book: Some Perceptions of Women in European and Canadian Society. The title is well chosen, for the image of Penelope and the metaphor of Penelope's web work on many levels throughout the book, perhaps on more levels than the author deliberately intended.

Penelope's web is a proverbial expression for perpetual, unending work and "woman's work," as another saying goes, "is never done." A friend, seeing Professor Griffiths struggling with the profound issues her book raises, twitted her by calling it Penelope's Macramé. Professor Griffiths, however, completed her book, and a fine piece of work it is.

The idea for the book originated in a series of five 28-minute programmes Professor Griffiths prepared in 1971 for CTV's "University of the Air." Their aim was to put contemporary Canadian feminism in historical perspective. This aim the book retains. It looks at the experience of Canadian women from the eighteenth century down through the 1967-1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada against the background of the experience of European women from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The book also examines the changing attitudes towards women in Europe and Canada over the past four centuries.

But, the author tells us, she did not design the book "solely as a historical work." (p. 9) Beyond her concern as an historian with women's past experience, Professor Griffiths as a woman is also interested in, and does not shy away from, fundamental questions of crucial importance to feminism, such as "the relationship between biological gender and sex roles in society." (p. 9) One sees how easily Penelope's web could thicken and tangle into Penelope's macramé.

Ambitious as the scope of this study is, Professor Griffiths approaches her subject with the modesty and caution of Penelope meeting Odysseus upon his return. The author disclaims scholarly pretensions for the book, although it is clearly based on wide and perceptive reading. The opening chapters in particular present a masterful synthesis of historical literature, drawing expertly on the work of P. Goubert, F. Braudel, C. Cipolla, P. Laslett, O. Hufton, and I. Pinchbeck, among others. She has, moreover, consulted not only historians. Convinced it is wrongheaded to study women, past or present, in isolation from the general context of humanity, human sexuality and human society, she "pillaged" such ancillary disciplines as anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology. It is as a humble lay person that she presents her gleanings from this interdisciplinary reading, stressing the tentativeness of her conclusions, and insisting that her aim is "the statement of problems rather than their solution." (p. 11) Hence the "Some Perceptions . . ." of the book's sub-title.

Two things in particular give judiciousness and balance to this study. One is the author's conviction, already mentioned, that "the study of women in history should not be isolated from the general enquiry into past human development." (p. 53) Failure to observe this dictum has hurt some studies of women written in over-reaction to the neglect if not total exclusion of women from histories (as well as sociologies, etc.) produced by a male-dominated and hence male-oriented profession. So, in Professor Griffiths' discussion of European women in the seventeenth century, she emphasizes the precariousness of human life in general in that century. Famine, plague and epidemics of disease made death a commonplace and ripe old age a rarity. And death was no respecter of sex. As for the eighteenth and nineteenth century colonization of Canada, she writes that on the voyages to the New World "there was little to choose between the sufferings of men and women." (p. 131)

The second source of balanced judgment in Professor Griffiths' study is her historian's sensitivity to the complexity of European civilization, and to the intricacy of Canadian society. So, she finds in the European cultural tradition not only misogyny and pronouncements on women's inferiority and proper subordination, but also celebration of womanhood and recognition of women's equality with men. Sometimes her striving for a balanced view reminds one of Penelope's weaving, as the case for women's oppression that is developed in one paragraph is all but taken back by qualification in the next. But Professor Griffiths rightly takes her stand with those historians of women who argue that to present women's history as one of uniform and relentless oppression is not only to distort the reality of that past but also to do a disservice to present-day women who stand to benefit from learning of the


Sarah Jackson 76

richness, vitality and ingenuity of women's lives in the past.

Professor Griffiths does not deny the existence of limitations and obstacles to women's self-determination and achievement in the past, beyond those of basic material conditions common to men and women. What she wishes to recall to the reader is the degree of independence achieved and the variety of activities performed by women within the particular and general limitations they faced. Here Penelope has symbolic significance as "a woman trying desperately to achieve a balance between what she wanted, what she could obtain, and what the immediate circumstances permitted her to obtain." (p. 8) But Penelope also serves as a symbol of women's cunning, dissimulation and coquetry, for, despite her rank and wealth, even Penelope had to resort to the devices of the powerless. Perhaps more often than she realizes, the examples Professor Griffiths cites of women having accommodated their talents and ambitions to their situations are cases of women who had to manipulate from behind the scenes, to exercise power indirectly.

Restrictions on the rights of women, in the way of prejudice and discrimination against women, Professor Griffiths views as on the increase in Europe from the second half of the eighteenth century. The agricultural revolution, industrialization and urbanization brought about a greater separation between private home and public work place and a sharper division of labour between the sexes. These changes affected differently women of different economic strata. But as the emergence of separate spheres for male and female accompanied the rise to dominance of the ideology of male supremacy and female inferiority, the female sphere in general became the one more narrowly circumscribed. I grant that this phenomenon is formidably complex; nonetheless I regret that Professor Griffiths in some passages discusses the increase in sex-role typing less as the outcome of changing property relations and economic and social institutions than as the result of a human need to classify and categorize for the purpose of bringing order into an increasingly complex society.

The author deplores the rigid sex-role typing which relegates hardness, imperturbability and aggressiveness to the male public sphere and tenderness, emotionality and patient compliance to the female private sphere. The perverse extreme of this division is the pride the Nazi S.S. took in their conquest over sentimentality, that is, compassion and concern for other human beings. But more commonly the division still means a drastic reduction in the range of human characteristics and emotional expression available to either men or women.

Professor Griffiths certainly agrees that that the emphasis of feminists "upon the

essential humanity of women--that they are human beings before and above being women--is both valid and important." (p. 221) Nonetheless she faults the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada for having accepted unquestioningly as the goal for Canadian society in the future that: "'Everyone will be a human being first and men or women second.'" (p. 225) Her wide reading has taught her that "all cultures reinforce biological gender with social conventions." (p. 221) Therefore she would keep open the discussion of (and encourage research into) the possibility of sex-linked differences in temperament and aptitude. Personally I am somewhat leary of such endeavours, remembering that, as with Victorian medical research on menstruation, scientific study can easily produce evidence for prevailing prejudices. As George Eliot wrote in the Prelude to Middlemarch: "if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude."

These last observations are not intended as serious criticism of Professor Griffiths' book. Indeed the great value of her wide ranging study is that it forces the reader to take into consideration so many circumstances impinging on the question of women's power and status in the past as well as in the present and future. For its rich weave, detailed texture and bold design, I unhesitatingly recommend Penelope's Web to anyone interested in the contemporary debate on women.

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Sex and Power in History Amaury de Riencourt. New York: David McKay, 1974. Pp. 469.

Sex and Power in History must have been a difficult book to write. It is certainly difficult to read and review for it ranges in a somewhat disorganized and repetitious fashion over a multiplicity of topics throughout the course of human history.

Amaury de Riencourt, the French journalist and historian, shows how differences between the sexes have shaped our destinies. Employing the techniques of anthropology, biology, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology and theology, he studies the social position, economic status and general influence of females since the anthropoids and concludes that women are naturally passive, emotional creatures while men are active and rational. He perceives a dualistic balance between the sexes and contends that when this balance is upset disaster beckons. Proof of this, the author says, can be found in both the classical and contemporary