

A Response to Angela West

Tom Brown

Angela West's valuable article on 'Women and the End of Time' (*New Blackfriars*, October 1981) seems to make one crucial unwarranted move. West argues rightly that as far as we know all societies have been patriarchal, and then concludes that since this form seems to be eternal, the contradiction of Juliet Mitchell's case – who also believes that patriarchy has been universal but who urges political struggle against it – can only be eschatologically resolved. This seems unduly pessimistic. West is silent on the fact that the subjection of women in history has a material basis: it has, to cut a good many tricky theoretical corners, a good deal to do with the sexual division of labour. There is no reason to suppose that the material conditions of scarcity, violence and economic appropriation which have universally characterised class-history will go on forever, since patriarchy is a structure of domination deeply locked into these conditions there is no need to believe that it is 'eternal' (as opposed to 'historically universal') either. Nor do I read Juliet Mitchell to believe that patriarchy is in this sense eternal: how could she think it 'unchangeable' and also speak of its 'slow death throes'?

The only sure answer to whether the unconscious opened up by patriarchy is eternal is that we do not know and have had no way of finding out. When Jacques Lacan speaks of the unconscious as eternal he appears to mean that its constitutive mechanisms (displacement, condensation, slippage etc) are, rather than that its particular ideological contents are immutable. Nationalising industry will not rid us of Yorkshire Rippers, but there is no *a priori* reason to believe that the abolition of the sexual division of labour by both political and ideological struggle, the destruction of the nuclear family and the socialisation of and control over the systems of sexual reproduction and nurture will not provide the conditions for a different form of unconscious. It may well be that the subordination of the pleasure principle to the reality principle is an unfortunate condition of any human society whatsoever (though as Marcuse suggests we can have a lot of fun finding out how far we can go), but it is not necessarily true that the reality principle is eternally fated to assume the specific ideological formation of the patriarchal, castrating and domineering father of the Oedipus complex. We may be able to find other ways of figuring

the Law which severs us from Nature and wrests us into Culture, just as we may be able to find other ways of figuring Nature besides woman. (The African Oedipus complex, according to some researchers, figures the censorious power quite differently from the Western). Christians sometimes have a habit of reaching too quickly for their eschatology. But first we have to find out, as David Lodge might say, how far we can go, and since I take the only interesting Christian answer to Lodge to be 'never far enough', Angela West should not depress us *yet*.

Response to Tom Brown

Angela West

I am sorry if my Genesis and Patriarchy article 'Women and the End-Time' threatened to depress Tom Brown, especially since his response to it was most encouraging and quite cheered me up.

In the article, I made use of the work of Juliet Mitchell, in particular drawing attention to the major contradiction she confronts: that patriarchy has been a historically universal aspect of human society which is rooted in the constitution of the unconscious; but that political struggle to bring about change in the 'eternal' form of the unconscious is necessary – especially for feminists. My conclusion – that this contradiction is only eschatologically resolvable – is, according to Tom Brown, 'unduly pessimistic'.

Well, firstly, I agree to being pessimistic (at one level); but if Gramsci is to be believed, 'pessimism of the intellect' is entirely respectable for historical materialists. I'm suggesting that it is a similar prerequisite for Christian hope.

Secondly, the fact that Juliet Mitchell's case is presented (or at least can be understood) as being in the form of contradiction is precisely what makes it credible for me. What tends to depress me is the various attempts that are made to resolve this essential contradiction primarily, if not solely at the level of theoretical discourse, and the accompanying belief that this is possible. And this leads to the third point; namely the real difference between us seems to lie in the meaning we give to 'eschatologically resolvable'. But more of that in a minute.