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A Prison for Others—A Burden to One's Self

Anne Collins Smith and Owen M. Smith

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Women have come a long way since the mid-1960's, both in the real world and in the world of philosophy. Given the advances in society and the developments within feminism that took place between that decade and the first decade of the 21st century, we might reasonably expect the new *Prisoner* series to present a more contemporary perspective on women than the original. Such is most emphatically not the case. If we compare the original Village to the new one, it looks as if those pennyfarthing wheels are spinning backwards instead of forwards.

Where it all began—with Frankenstein's grandmother

In the 1960's, the most prominent kind of feminist philosophy was liberal feminism. This kind of feminism has a long history, going back to the British philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), whose name may seem familiar because her daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, wrote the novel *Frankenstein*. At a time when middle-class women were confined to their household duties and had little opportunity to exercise their minds or develop their moral sense, Wollstonecraft made the devastatingly straightforward argument that women have the same capabilities as men to be rational and self-determined, and therefore deserve the same right to reach their full potential. She argued that if women were permitted to have education and autonomy, they would develop into intelligent people of good character. Pursuing this idea to its logical conclusion, she theorized that if education and autonomy were denied to men, they would be just as ignorant and selfish as the women of her day.¹

While early liberal feminists visualized an ideal world in which wives and mothers were well-educated women whose families benefited from their intelligence and moral goodness, liberal feminists of the 1960's saw the role of housewife as a prison. Works in many different genres explored this theme, such as Betty Friedan's groundbreaking treatise *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Pamela Zoline's experimental science-fiction story "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967), and even Peg Bracken's quietly subversive manual *The I Hate to Cook Book* (1960).

These liberal feminists asserted that women should not be restricted to the private sphere of the home, but should also be free to participate in the public sphere by entering arenas normally restricted to men, such as politics and the workplace. Given the same opportunities as men, liberal feminists predicted, women would achieve similar successes. While the 1960's saw much progress in women's liberation, oppressive institutions and expectations still flourished. The paradigm for women was still the housewife who was relegated to her home and depended entirely on her husband's paycheck; there was still a stigma attached to women who worked outside the home.

Women's fashions of the 1960's, while often intended to be liberated and daring, were also confining in their own way. The superskinny model known as Twiggy was celebrated as the ideal figure; fashion guides from that era reveal that normal-sized women squeezed themselves into tight-fitting girdles on a daily basis, accepting discomfort as part of their lot. After all, one must suffer to be beautiful! High-heeled shoes were everywhere, from the pumps worn by television housewives to the go-go boots sported by trendsetting fashionistas. Feminists pointed out that high heels were painful to wear and damaging to the body. Moreover, they immobilized women by making it hard for them to walk, let alone run, as did the fashionable clothing. Have you ever tried to climb a tree wearing a miniskirt? How about just sitting down without sharing too much with the world? Then as now, feminist protests seemed to fall on deaf ears.

"We are democratic—in some ways."

Now, let's take a look at the women in the Village of 1967². Most of the time, they wear the same clothes as the men: striped shirts, light-colored slacks, and deck shoes. When it's chilly they wear the same kind of blazer or short cape as the men. We occasionally see women in skirts or dresses, but even then they wear sensible shoes—not a high heel to be seen. While we don't actually see their undergarments, there's no indication that any of them are wearing girdles, either.

What work is done by women in the Village? At the lower end of the economic scale, we have to admit that manual labor is divided into traditional gender roles. Men do the outdoor physical labor such as

gardening and housepainting, while women work indoors as maids. For skilled laborers and professionals, however, the job situation is much more egalitarian. Women work as observers and observer-supervisors. They drive taxis; they run shops. Women work as medical technicians and as doctors. We see no housewives in the Village; in fact, we only see one married woman there (No. 73), and she appears only briefly in a single episode ("Hammer into Anvil"). The women who are prisoners are former spies, just like the male prisoners.

Women also hold positions of authority. Three of the seventeen episodes (about 18%) feature a female No. 2 ("Free For All," "Many Happy Returns," and "Dance of the Dead"). This may not sound like very many, but its time, it was quite remarkable. In 1967, the numbers and percentages of women in positions of authority in the real world were much more dismal:

- Female Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom: 25 out of 630, or 4%³
- Female representatives in the United States Congress: 11 out of 435, or 2.5%
- Female senators in the United States Senate: 1 out of 100, or 1%⁴

Frankly, if you don't mind imprisonment, brainwashing, and the occasional spot of torture, the Village looks like a liberal-feminist utopia!

"We are all pawns, my dear."

Since the Village, which seems to represent the ideals of liberal feminism, is a place of confinement, manipulation, and torture, is there a fundamental problem within liberal feminism itself?

First of all, we must emphasize that the Village is only a superficial representation of liberal feminism. Liberal feminists from Wollstonecraft to Friedan emphasized the right of each individual, man or woman, to self-determination. In direct contrast, "the aim [of the Village] is to harness every individual and subsume each citizen's identity to the good of the state."⁵ At a deep level, the Village's suppression of individuality is fundamentally opposed to the individual autonomy prized by liberal feminists.

Nonetheless the surface resemblance we have noted does point to a troubling limitation within liberal feminism. An unquestioning acceptance of traditionally masculine-identified values led liberal feminists to emphasize stereotypically masculine characteristics such as independence and rationality, while minimizing stereotypically feminine values such as interdependence and emotion. ⁶There is nothing particularly feminine about women in the Village; they hold the same positions and wear the same clothing as men.

Indeed, women in the Village take on not only jobs and positions of power more usually held by men, but even personality characteristics similar to those traditionally identified as masculine. Female characters are openly discouraged from behaving in feminine ways. In "Dance of the Dead," for example, No. 6's observer is mocked by her female supervisor when she is shocked by to learn of another prisoner's death. "I got to know him quite well," muses the observer. "Well, he didn't know you, did he?" snaps the supervisor.

As a reaction against this flaw in liberal feminism, later feminists argue that our understanding of what it means to be human must incorporate qualities traditionally associated with both men and women, and that men and women should be free to exhibit these qualities regardless of their traditional gendered associations.⁷ It is this mixture of qualities that we would expect to see in the new series; unfortunately, as we shall learn, this will not turn out to be the case.

"He'll be all good deeds and sympathy."

Interestingly enough, there is one aspect of the original series in which women do receive different treatment from men. This gender discrimination is not a feature of the Village itself, but the result of the Prisoner's own psychological makeup: he is chivalrous—to a fault.

The Prisoner demonstrates his chivalry time and time again. In "Hammer into Anvil," the suicide of No. 73, a female acquaintance, inspires No. 6 to abandon temporarily his quest for escape and to seek vengeance against No. 2; the apparent suicide of Cobb, a male friend, in "Arrival," has no such effect. In "Living in Harmony," Kathy's role in his escape attempt and the subsequent threat of her punishment anchor him in a town he wants to leave and a role he does not wish to assume. While he reaches impulsively for his guns after the honest citizen (male) who comes to him for help is killed, he does not actually take them up until Kathy (female) is threatened. In "It's Your Funeral," he uses his credit to buy sweets for an elderly woman whose credit has run out; his vulnerability in such situations is so well-known that the Village computer correctly predicts the outcome of the encounter in advance.

The audience may consider chivalry a pleasant personality trait; the administrators of the Village see it as a vulnerability to be ruthlessly exploited. Indeed, it is one of the chief weapons that they use against him, using women to gain his confidence in order to thwart his escape attempts, to learn his reason for resigning, or simply to break him.

To be sure, the women involved may be innocent pawns. In "Checkmate," the female prisoner who plays the queen in the live chess game is brainwashed, first into falling in love with No. 6, then into betraying him for his own good. She deceives him brilliantly, all the while sincerely believing that she is doing what is best for him. Her opening greeting inviting him to become "the Queen's pawn" foreshadows the rest of the episode. The watchmaker's daughter in "It's Your Funeral" is also being manipulated. She has been drugged so that she will faint if the Prisoner rejects her request to help prevent No. 2's assassination, thereby triggering his chivalrous instincts.

The Village's treatment of chivalry as a weakness to be exploited serves to emphasize the liberal-feminist veneer that the original Village exhibits. Liberal feminists disdain chivalry as a product of a system that considers women to be weak and inferior.

"Never trust a woman—even the four-legged variety."

Indeed, it is this pernicious attitude toward women as weak and inferior that provides Betty Friedan with the title of her groundbreaking liberal feminist treatise. She explains that "the feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity," describing the mystique as "grafted onto old prejudices and comfortable conventions."⁸ Upon closer examination, these prejudices and conventions are ancient, fascinating, and disturbing, and an examination of them will provide an important foundation for our comparison of the original and new Prisoner series.

According to many ancient cultures, women are associated with chaos, death, and incomprehensibility. They are perceived as mysterious, devious, and manipulative; they cannot be trusted. They easily change their appearance and their mood; in their presence, nothing is what it seems to be. They defy categories and cross boundaries; they threaten order and endanger sanity.

The liberal-feminist veneer of the Village resists the "feminine mystique," but the ancient views that underlie the mystique can still be found in the Village. They appear especially strongly in the context of fantasy: wherever we find elements of the fantastic, we find elements of the chaotic feminine as well:

- A costume ball brings out the extremes: traditional femininity in sexy costumes such as Bo Peep and Cleopatra, and boundary-blurring androgyny in a Peter Pan outfit ("Dance of the Dead").
- The fairy tale that the Prisoner tells to children as a bed-time story reunites the ancient associations of women and death ("The Girl Who Was Death").
- In the surreal Western scenario that the Prisoner is forced to enact, the beauty of Kathy the saloon girl literally drives a man mad ("Living in Harmony").

In the normal everyday life of the Village, however, these characteristics are not particularly associated with women as opposed to men. While women like Nadia ("The Chimes of Big Ben") and Alison ("The Schizoid Man") betray the Prisoner, he is betrayed by men as well, such as Cobb ("Arrival") and the Rook ("Checkmate").

Instead, the Village itself resonates with chaos. The powers that control the Village, as well as their representatives of both sexes, are themselves mysterious, devious, and manipulative; they threaten sanity and change constantly; they cannot be trusted; and nothing in the Village is ever what it seems to be.

You've come a long way—or have you?

While the Village of 1967 appeared very different from the society of the 1960's, the Village of 2009 looks very much like the world we live in today.⁹ We see women in many roles, from waitress to doctor to housewife. Some women have chosen to marry; others have chosen to remain single. Women in the Village dress much the same way as women in the outside world, with the sole exception that everyone is wearing tennis shoes, an apparent nod to the earlier series.

Similarly, the Prisoner of the new series differs from the original Prisoner when it comes to chivalry. He doesn't appear to be especially chivalrous, although that doesn't stop the administrators of the new Village from trying to use his sympathy for Three-One-Three and his artificially induced attraction to Four-One-Five against him. Rather, Six seems to form more genuine bonds with male friends, such as Sixteen, his ersatz brother, and especially the taxi driver One-Four-Seven.

Most startlingly, however, the new Village differs from the original in the role of Two. Rather than having a constantly shifting parade of No. 2's, the new Village features a single Two throughout the entire series. This difference enables the new series to depict Two as a married man whose family lives in the Village, and to explore his family relationships in detail. The rarity of marriages in the original series throws into sharp relief the importance of Two's family, especially his wife.

Helen, Two's wife, exists in a curious state for most of the series: she lies in bed all day, eyes open

and unblinking. We learn that this state is the result of a cocktail of pills that Two periodically gives her to swallow, which we eventually discover is a mixture of powerful sedatives and hallucinogens. The motive for the administration of the pills to Helen is at first obscure; in the light of the portrayals of No. 2 in the original series, we suspect that Two has a nefarious purpose in drugging his wife, although his manner toward her is always tender and loving. This unique portrait of Helen, however, foreshadows the importance of her position in the Village—she is the hidden power behind its very existence. Helen is eventually revealed as the source of the Village; she brought it into being and enables it to continue in existence, as long as she remains in an altered state of consciousness. The brief periods when she returns to a normal state of consciousness lead to the formation of holes, terrifying rifts in the very fabric of the Village's existence that imperil the safety of its inhabitants; at least two people fall into them, never to be seen again.

At first the foundational role assigned to Helen sounds like an exciting triumph for feminism: a woman holding the ultimate authority! But if we look closely, we will see that the actions of Helen, and of her successor, Three-One-Three, represent a huge step backward as far as the portrayal of women is concerned.

"I'm not safe for you to be around."

The key to the view of women in the new series can be revealed by an examination of the ancient association of women and chaos. Chaos is present—and associated primarily with women—in the new series to a much greater extent than in the original series. Rather than appearing most clearly as an element of fantasy, characteristics traditionally associated with chaos, such as violence, madness, and most important, liminality, serve as integral elements of the women who play a major role in Six's sojourn in the Village:

- Five-Five-Four, the waitress to whom the dying Ninety-Three directs Six, is a "dreamer," someone who experiences memories of the outside world in dreams. She dies violently when the cafe where she works is blown up, possibly as a punishment for her transgression in telling Six about dreamers, but possibly as a punishment merely for being a dreamer herself.
- Three-One-Three is a doctor in the Village to whom Six is attracted. Six trusts her, and she helps him in a number of ways, such as analyzing Helen's pills. She is also, however, manipulated by Two into working for him; for example, she performs the treatments that cause Six to fall in love with Four-One-Five. Like Five-Five-Four, she dreams of the outside world and sometimes sketches it. However, she cannot live in the outside world; we learn that she was so scarred by her mother's abuse as a child that she is completely dissociated from reality.
- Four-One-Five is a liminal character whose existence in both realities helps the viewer to recognize the relationship between the Village and the outside world. In the outside world, she is an agent of Summakor who seduces Six on the night after his resignation, arousing both his passions and his suspicions. She dies violently when Six's apartment is blown up while he is out getting breakfast for her. In the Village, Six is manipulated with genetic treatments to fall in love with her and nearly marries her. When she learns that he is kissing someone else outside the church where they are to marry, she throws herself into a hole that apparently leads to nothingness, one of the rifts in reality that plague the Village, but not before revealing that Two deliberately brought her to the Village to break Six's heart. Her disappearance from the Village apparently coincides with the explosion in Six's apartment in the outer world.

While each of these major female characters display some characteristics associated with chaos, the chaotic role for females is most clearly manifested in the character of Helen, the wife of Two.

"Nobody ever said that dreaming would be such hard work."

In the outside world, Helen turns out to be Dr. Helen Blake, a biochemist who is fascinated with the human mind. The Village itself turns out to be the direct result of her attempt to fathom the depths of human consciousness. We learn that the Village is intended as a therapeutic setting for mentally ill people where fragments of their minds can reconstruct themselves and regain their sanity. Just as the gospel song that recurs throughout the miniseries reminds us constantly to "take your burden to the Lord and leave it there," Helen and Two expect their unwitting patients to take their burdens to the Village and leave them there.

This project, however, is a failure. The Village becomes a separate dimension of reality in which these fragments of human minds are involuntarily imprisoned. They are kept ignorant of their true nature, glimpsing reality only in dreams or, for the select few, in a mirage depicting the shimmering towers of Summakor beyond the limits of the Village. They live in constant fear, terrorized by thought police and medical experiments. While a few people, like Nine-Oh-Nine and One-Four-Seven, appear to benefit in the real world from their time in the Village, others, like Three-One-Three, are incapable of being helped.

Moreover, admirable as Helen's intentions are, she utterly sacrifices her own individuality and autonomy to complete this project. Taking on the role of maintaining the existence of the Village puts first Helen and then her successor Three-One-Three into an utterly passive, unresponsive state. Each woman is reduced to an unblinking automaton focused entirely on providing sustenance to others, unable to act or interact in any other way. We've seen this look before, in the glazed eyes of the overwhelmed housewife whose every waking moment is consumed by her demanding family. What Helen and Three-One-Three do is not a glorious act of creation; rather, it is a horrible caricature of motherhood.

"That's a bit philosophical ... for a Thursday."

If we reflect on the caricature of motherhood represented by Helen and Three-One-Three, we find even deeper associations with chaos that denigrate the role and status of women. One way to recognize these associations is to step back and take a look at the structure of reality presented in the new series.

Unlike the original series, in which the Village is contiguous with the rest of the world, albeit in an undisclosed location, the new series presents reality as separated into two distinct, but interrelated levels: the Village and the outside world. From a philosophical perspective, this division of reality is most reminiscent of Plato's worldview. In the *Republic*¹⁰, Plato presents an account of reality that consists of two distinct levels: a lower level (the material world), which he represents as a dark underground cave dimly illuminated by fire, and an upper level (the intelligible world) which he depicts as a sunlit surface world. The people who are imprisoned in the cave perceive only flickering shadows on the wall of the cave, mere representations of the objects that exist in the surface world, not the objects themselves. They can't know the surface world until they are freed from the cave and led out into the light. Plato envisions people who have experienced the surface world returning to the lower level to try to rescue others, but they have a hard time convincing their fellow prisoners that there really is another world "up there," to such an extent that their fellow prisoners may even resist these rescue attempts with violence.¹¹

The relationship between the Village and the outside world is much the same as the relationship between the cave and the surface world in Plato's *Republic*. The Village represents a lower level of reality, containing only representations of the objects that exist in the outside world. Since events in the Village only occur in a distorted image of reality, they don't make much sense. This explains why Six's experiences in the Village are so bizarre and disjointed. The world outside the Village represents a higher level of reality. Here, we find the real objects that are imitated in the Village. Events make more sense in the outside world because they belong to true reality, thus, Six's memories of New York depict a life that flows consistently from one event to the next, as compared to his disjointed experiences in the Village. Like a person in Plato's story who returns to the cave to try to free the other prisoners, Six has trouble convincing his fellow prisoners that there is another reality. Those who remember the outside world, the "dreamers," are in danger and may be killed or driven to suicide by their fellow prisoners.

The story in the *Republic* is meant by Plato to be a description of the way reality now exists, and so it offers no explanation of how the lower level got to be the way it is. In another one of Plato's works, the *Timaeus*,¹² Plato does provide an account of how the lower level of reality came to be a representation of the upper level. The key figure in this story is the "demiurge," or craftsman, who finds the material world in a chaotic, disturbed state and organizes it into a single coherent cosmos.¹³ In crafting the lower level, the demiurge looks to the higher level, which accounts for the resemblances between them. With regard to the new Village, we can see a parallel to the demiurge in the figure of Two, who stands at the summit of an integrated, hierarchical Village, borrowing ideas and structures from the outside world as he designs the Village to suit his own purposes.

While the *Timaeus* provides Plato's explanation of the organization of reality, it still doesn't answer one big question: where does the lower level come from? In Plato's writings there is no story that answers this question. To fill this important gap, later philosophers in the Platonic tradition supplemented the works of Plato with additional stories. Among these stories are a group of myths that center around a female figure, Sophia, whose actions lead to the creation of the lower level of reality. These stories were developed by the Gnostics, members of a widely diverse set of religious and philosophical groups that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era.

"Only a mother can destroy every ounce of hope in you."

These Gnostic myths are essentially creation stories, which draw not only on Platonic philosophy, but also on elements from the creation myths of ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as the *Enuma Elish* of the Babylonians. However, unlike these Near Eastern creation myths, which move from a state of primordial chaos

to an organized, functional cosmos, Gnostic myths are inverted, moving from a primordial state of cosmos to a state of unorganized, dysfunctional chaos.

The key figure in this process is Sophia, whose name paradoxically means "wisdom." She is an inhabitant of the upper level of reality and, in an act of ambition and pride, she attempts to know the infinite, unknowable, divine first principle. This attempt fails, and Sophia falls into a state of fear, grief, and perplexity. For the Gnostics, the act of conception had a dual nature—it generates both an idea and a separate being (a pun that works in English as well as in ancient Greek). Sophia's unsuccessful attempt to conceive therefore produces a kind of miscarriage resulting in the generation of a shapeless, formless being out of her emotions.¹⁴ Gnostic myths often get very complex, sometimes describing multiple lower levels of reality as this failed attempt at conception is repeated by successive feminine beings, but eventually there arises a lower level of reality that must be organized into some kind of coherent material world.

In the final stage of the myth, the female source of the lower level of reality traps sparks of the divine within it, where they become human souls in need of redemption. By receiving knowledge of the true nature of reality and their own origin in a higher level of reality, these souls are saved from their existence on the lower level of reality, and are then able to return to the upper level of reality, where they truly belong.

"Breathe in ... breathe out ... more Village."

By comparing Helen to Sophia, we can now discover the fundamental attitude toward women present in the new series. Like Sophia, Helen attempts an impossible task—fathoming the depths of the unknowable human mind. This attempt at conception generates the Village, a malformed, lower level of reality, characterized by fear, grief, and perplexity. The inhabitants of the Village are akin to the sparks of divinity trapped in the material world because their true origin lies in a higher level of reality.

The similarity between the Gnostic myth and the new series can be taken to an even deeper level. Helen, like Sophia, only generates the raw material from which the Village is made. Someone else—a male figure—has to be the one to provide order and structure to the Village. In the new series, this figure is Two, who takes on the role of Plato's demiurge, a figure who also appears in Gnostic mythology. In the Gnostic myths, however, the demiurge is an evil figure who seeks to imprison the sparks of divinity within the material world rather than to accomplish their release. Two's actions show him to be a close parallel to this evil Gnostic demiurge. While he is able to organize and control the Village, he does not provide the knowledge necessary for the salvation of the Village's inhabitants. He does not reveal to them the existence of outside world or the true nature of the Village; in fact, he deliberately conceals this knowledge from them. Most important, he does not reveal to the inhabitants of the Village their own true nature as fragments of the minds of people in the real world.

These reflections also illuminate the tragic events concerning the remaining member of Two's family, his son Eleven-Twelve. Two explains to Six that he and Helen were unable to have children in the real world, but decided to have a family in the Village. Their son, Eleven-Twelve, has no memory of his childhood and cannot exist outside the Village. Helen hesitates before describing him as "born" in the Village; he is more correctly described as a creation of Helen's mind, brought into being in a manner similar to the generation of the Village itself. He is also a troubled young man who kills his lover Nine-Oh-Nine, suffocates his mother as she lies on her bed in the Village, and finally kills himself. The disastrous outcome of Helen's attempt to conceive a child is a narrative doublet for the disastrous outcome of her attempt to conceive the mystery of the human mind.

"It has to be possible to do this the right way."

In the Gnostic myth, there is a happy ending for the unfortunate sparks of divinity trapped in the lower level of reality. A savior from the upper level enters their world and imparts to them the knowledge they need to accomplish their salvation. In the new Prisoner series, it appears for a short time that Six might become the savior of these fragmented minds trapped in the Village, rescuing them by revealing the truth about the nature of the Village and their own true origins. Instead, he decides that the new Village could accomplish its original purpose if it were better run, and so he chooses to stay. He becomes in effect the new Two, taking on the role of the evil Gnostic demiurge and enabling the original Two to return to the outside world. As Two needed Helen to maintain the existence of the Village, so also Six needs Three-One-Three, who dutifully takes the cocktail of pills and tearfully assumes the burden of dreaming the Village. There is no happy ending, only a perpetuation of the tragedy of the Village.

We might have hoped that the new Prisoner series, developed after decades of advances in feminist philosophy, would be more progressive in its portrayal of women. Instead, it is older and regressive, drawing

on a more primitive and more negative association of women with chaos. In the new series, the Village remains a place of confinement, manipulation, and torture; women, however, are no longer simply equal partners in evil. They are now its very source.

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