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Marge Piercy's *Small Changes*:
Welcome to the Sexual Revolution

NANCY TOPPING BAZIN

Marge Piercy's novel *Small Changes* is encyclopedic in its incredibly detailed, all-encompassing feminist analysis of female and male behavior in the late 60's and early 70's. The behavior of the younger generation is compared and contrasted with that of their parents. The overall impression given by the novel is that, despite the very different life-styles of the two generations, very little change has, in fact, occurred. At the end of the novel, sexism prevails and no significant threat to male control of the power structure has developed. From examination of the title, Piercy seems to place her emphasis not upon the "changes" but upon the "small" impact those changes have had.

Miriam and Beth, the protagonists in *Small Changes*, have moved far beyond being heroines in the old-fashioned sense of that word, and they are in the process of becoming what might be called women-heroes.¹ The traditional heroine is a person who has little control, strength, or power, and, consequently, when she is in trouble, she is incapable of saving herself or other people; instead she is the one who has to be saved. The woman-hero, in contrast, is self-reliant, and therefore, despite great adversity, she is often capable of effecting positive changes within herself and her environment. Piercy's protagonists attempt to effect change, particularly within themselves, and to some extent they succeed. But both of them, especially Miriam, repeatedly find themselves confronting the sexism that continues to exist, within themselves as well as others. They are well on their way to becoming women-heroes, but because of this sexism, they often find themselves under overwhelming pressure to give up the new role and re-assume the dependent, helpless role traditionally assigned to the female.

The cultural attributes of the heroine who marries and "lives

happily ever after" under the protection of her husband are clearly rejected by Beth, for she deserts her husband, builds her life around a women's commune and theatrical group, and defies social custom by choosing a woman, Wanda Rosario, for her lover. Very early in the book, she concludes that she will no longer accept what her culture has told her but will instead decide what she likes and thinks. In time, she grows much stronger than she was at the beginning of the novel and, through organizing a women's commune, creates a supportive atmosphere in which women can relate to one another and their children in new ways. Finally, however, because of a heterosexist custody decision, she and Wanda must kidnap Wanda's children and flee to another city. They are essentially in hiding, and, therefore, although they are beginning to make some contacts with the community, it will be some time, if ever, before it will be possible for them to accomplish anything in the way of meaningful change.

The second protagonist, Miriam Berg, has less feminist consciousness than Beth. At first, she cannot imagine why women would want to live together, and for a long time she fails to identify herself with other women. She even laughs at the anti-female jokes of her lovers, Phil and Jackson, thinking their mockery of other women has nothing to do with their attitude toward her. Miriam does demand that a male satisfy her needs as well as his in bed; and as she sees herself playing a slave-like role in her relationship with Jackson, she realizes this mutuality should exist in other kinds of male-female interactions. But she discovers repeatedly that men not only reject her as their equal but also punish her for assuming that she is. Jackson continues to dominate her; Tom Ryan rapes her to win a bet; Professor Graben tells her she should forget being a scientist and become a courtesan; her psychoanalyst suggests that because she competes with men, she is neurotic; and her response to this is to flee into what she thinks is the safety of marriage.

Miriam's control, strength, and power are threatened to an even greater extent when she has a baby, for she allows herself to fall into the role of the traditional mother. She then discovers that her needs and her husband's are totally different and that they are, in effect, "at war" (409). Furthermore, since she sees very few adults during the day, she realizes that she is "too emotionally dependent" on her husband (409). "The central terror of her life was that Neil would stop loving her" (461). When she

renews her friendship with Phil and starts baking and selling bread with him, she is afraid to defy Neil's command to stop. She also has to accept Neil's getting her pregnant a second time in his drive to possess and control her. Gradually, however, she becomes conscious of the bad example her subservient behavior is setting for her children. More and more often she refuses to "break down" and submit in order to win back Neil's love when they have quarreled (535), and as she begins to feel "connected" to people outside of her home, she experiences the end of the "slow relentless dying back she had known" (538). The potential for her rebirth is there, but it will not occur without considerable pain. She is terrified of loneliness, and at the end of the novel, her husband (who has sought comfort for his ego elsewhere) is about to leave her for another woman.

The struggles of Beth and Miriam to be able to exhibit intellectual and emotional strength, to develop their sexuality, and to keep their identity and independence are heroic. However, despite all the struggling, the differences between their lives and the miserable, lonely directionless lives of their mothers (glimpsed throughout the novel), represent little real change. The changes are indeed small and although this book may be, as one reviewer stated, "the big rich novel that one hoped would emerge from the new women's consciousness" (*Library Journal* 2337), one would like to have a better ending recorded for female protagonists. At the close of *Small Changes* Miriam is a prisoner in her home and Beth a fugitive from justice; neither is functioning from a position of real strength.

In her later novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Piercy presents an alternative to the kind of world she had depicted in *Small Changes* three years earlier. The female protagonist in *Woman on the Edge of Time* visits one of the possible, but not necessarily probable, societies of the future—one that is androgynous. There males and females are not identified by clothing, behavior, occupations, or even language, and the persons in it respond erotically to whomever they wish. Individuality and infinite variety replace the conformity imposed by sex roles. In this androgynous society people live in families, but family members are not blood-related; some space is shared by the group, yet at the same time all but babies have a private space as well. No people are hungry; no needless work is done; hence, there is considerable leisure time; also, energy resources are not wasted. In such a world notions of evil naturally "center around power

and greed" (139). Piercy's creation of this utopia provides an understanding of the extent to which a vision of androgyny—of wholeness—underlies her critique of the patriarchal society depicted in *Small Changes*.

The first books devoted to the subject of androgyny appeared in 1973, the same year *Small Changes* was published. Subsequent publications and debate have continued to clarify the complexity of this concept and the enormity of the task facing all conscious women and men if there are to be any major changes in the way women and men relate to one another and to the world around them. The particular inadequacies that Piercy criticizes in *Small Changes* can be effectively illuminated by applying to her novel the various conceptions of androgyny that have emerged.

The most widely accepted conception of androgyny is that which has been empirically measured by psychologist Sandra Bem. Bem developed tests to indicate how androgynous or non-androgynous people are—that is, to what extent they do or do not possess a balance of so-called masculine and feminine traits (e.g., instrumental and expressive, assertive and yielding, forceful and sensitive to the needs of others). She proceeded to prove that those who behave most androgynously are indeed the most able to function effectively, for they have more possible responses available to them in any given situation. Sex roles, then, are not, as previously believed, signs of normality but, on the contrary, impediments to successful human responsiveness.

In *Small Changes* almost all the female characters—Beth, Miriam, Dorine, Wanda, Sally, and others—strive to make themselves and their children more androgynous. As long as Miriam is a student and career woman, she is the most androgynous female in the novel: she is gentle and yet assertive enough to be known as a "brilliant bitch"; she makes herself look very feminine and yet studies and works in a male field, computer science, and she likes to be sociable and yet loves to be alone with her work.

But Piercy shows that, while women aspire toward androgyny, males are almost totally unaware that it would be a desirable goal for either sex. In her novel the imbalance between male and female consciousness and goals, combined with male resentment of unexpected changes in female behavior, creates what can readily be described as an intolerable situation for the women. For example, the men do experience Miriam's androgynous behavior as threatening or tiresome, but their responses to her effectively work to suppress her creative spirit. Male graduate students, fearing

Miriam as competition, belittle her by saying she gets her grants by lying "flat on her back" (59). Jackson is angered when Miriam neglects him in favor of her work, but he expects her to stay away from him when he has work to do. Phil sometimes prefers to sleep with Dorine instead of Miriam, because Dorine never complains or makes demands (284). The most threatening instance of Miriam's androgynous behavior (most threatening because it is work-related and therefore money and power related) occurs when she presents a seminar on how to solve a problem her male colleagues have long thought to be insoluble. Instead of discussing her idea, they respond with vicious, hostile, irrelevant comments. Although her supervisor thinks her idea is of interest, he refuses to commit money to develop it, since there is not enough support for it within the group. Unable to carry out this project, Miriam is forced to work on a military contract that goes against her ethical principles. Because of this unpleasant work situation, she quits her job and has a child.

What happens to Miriam helps to clarify that androgynous behavior like hers is not in itself a sufficient threat to the patriarchy. Indeed, what Piercy shows is that the men are threatened enough by Miriam's behavior to attack it mercilessly but not sufficiently threatened to be forced to respect her right to relate to them as an equal. Furthermore, because she has been socialized to believe in the institution of motherhood, she can be suppressed without difficulty.

The changes in Miriam and Neil after their first child is born exemplify the way in which androgynous traits and behavior of the kind Bem has studied are easily broken down by sex role socialization in times of stress. Before Neil becomes a father, he too seems to be quite androgynous. He appears to be as gentle and loving as Miriam is assertive and independent. However, under the strain of parenting, both revert to very traditional, less rational behavior. As the sole wage-earner, Neil becomes the dominant, demanding member of the household, and like many females, Miriam is betrayed by the patriarchal myths she has internalized. She accepts that her own needs must always come after those of her children and husband, and she believes that only she can satisfy her child's needs; no day-care center or babysitting situation will do.

This leads to another conception of androgyny—that of androgynous parenting—that is, male and female equality, if not in producing children, at least in the rearing of them. Faced with

the reality that a man can "always get up and walk away" after intercourse whereas the woman can not, the science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin and feminist author Shulamith Firestone have imagined worlds in which there is no differentiation made between parents. In Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, males as well as females get pregnant; in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone claims scientists have the technology necessary so that women who do not wish to do so, do not have to carry their babies and give birth. Piercy adopts this vision in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, where embryos develop in artificial wombs. A female person in Piercy's androgynous future explains why this has come into effect: "As long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all become mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding" (105).

Whether or not artificial baby production proves workable and morally acceptable, there still remains the problem of persuading people to think in terms of parenthood instead of motherhood. How is a truly androgynous system of childrearing to be created? The importance of developing such a system is made evident in *Small Changes* through the depiction of how destructive the mother role has been to Miriam as a person. The emphasis Piercy places upon the connection between motherhood and the harm done to Miriam's career and to her self-esteem is crucial to an understanding of *Small Changes*. Since Neil's salary is higher than hers, they never even consider the idea that he might assume the responsibility of childrearing. Yet Neil unjustly turns against Miriam both for conforming to and for rebelling against her role as stay-at-home parent. Still worse, he plants in their children's minds the seeds of misogyny by exposing them to the contempt he feels for the subservient, harassed woman he has forced Miriam to become.

As an alternative to child care within the nuclear family, Piercy shows the commune women sharing the parental role. She seemingly agrees with Adrienne Rich's statement in *Of Women Born* that in the patriarchy "motherhood has been penal servitude," yet "it need not be" (14). But Piercy does not deny that there are disadvantages as well as advantages to group parenting. The commune children will be more relaxed and at ease with themselves and hopefully not misogynist, but Miriam's daughter, Ariane, raised in a nuclear family, will be brighter and more creative.

A third conception of androgyny that has recently come to the fore is that of free choice of sexual partners, regardless of

gender. For instance, in an essay entitled "Androgyny As an Ideal for Human Development," in *Feminism and Philosophy*, Ann Ferguson maintains that bisexuality will have to become the norm rather than the exception before sex roles can be eliminated. "For," in her words, "the primary mechanism whereby complementary rather than androgynous sex roles are maintained is through heterosexual training, and through the socialization of needs for love and sexual gratification to the search for a love partner of the opposite sex. Such a partner is sought to complement one in the traits that one has repressed or not developed because in one's own sex such traits were not socially accepted" (62).

As indicated in her keynote address at an Association for Women in Psychology conference, Sandra Bem's thinking has been moving in a similar direction. In recent experiments, she has demonstrated that both masculine and feminine—as opposed to androgynous—people choose to relate to persons of the opposite sex on the basis of looks rather than compatibility, which would be their basis for relating to someone of the same sex. Bem feels that indifference to gender is preferable to the gender-consciousness of persons who conform to the masculine or feminine stereotypes. Bem agrees with Ferguson that to achieve a general indifference to gender, people would have to have the choice of responding erotically or non-erotically to individuals of either sex. Granting this choice would eradicate the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Like Ferguson, Bem concludes that the reduction of gender-awareness to an absolute minimum is more likely to produce the utopian androgynous society she envisions than is the more superficial conception of androgyny that looks only at personality and non-genital behavior.

In *Small Changes* Piercy uses the bisexual Beth to explore and apparently sanction the free choice of sexual partners. Piercy's point of view is best illustrated through Beth's encounter with Jackson. Her sexual relationship with him includes orgasms and is "not better or worse than with Wanda" (506). She chooses to return to Wanda rather than to live with Jackson, however, because "making love with Wanda" is only "one of the ways they loved each other, and all day long there were other ways. Touching was loving like talking was loving like working together was loving. They made love to intensify the loving and then went about their business." With Jackson "there was not the loving. And they had no other business" (507). Thus, she chooses to go with Wanda, not because she prefers a female body, but because Wanda

understands what Jackson does not—that love must be integrated with the whole of one's life. The choice is made on the basis of personality and behavior, not gender.

A fourth conception of androgyny envisions a society characterized by "wholeness," without barriers created by sex, race, age, or social class—a just society in which there is an equal or near-equal distribution of wealth and, therefore, power. Although it may not be immediately apparent, the word "androgyny" is an appropriate term for describing such a society, because the achievement of wholeness, completeness, and integration has traditionally been celebrated through symbols of androgyny. Some gods, for instance, are androgynous. The Greeks created statues of god/goddesses who had both breasts and penises, and they were thought to be doubly powerful.² The Hebrew/Christian God is likewise androgynous;³ and the Taoist symbol shows a constant movement and interaction between its masculine and feminine halves.⁴ A society devoid of the barriers of race, class, age, and sex (which cause so much suffering) is similarly powerful, integrated, and whole. The word androgynous is appropriate, too, because the achievement of wholeness would require that positive feminine traits—like gentleness and nurturing—be integrated into what is now a lopsidedly masculine society. An androgynous society would value and provide for every individual in the same way that a loving parent would provide for his or her child, because it would not segregate and then punish people for less ability, darker skin, or certain genitals. This attitude of nurturing and love would likewise call for re-structuring society, so that each individual could develop to his or her greatest potential.

In the androgynous future of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, this revolution in values has already occurred; no discrimination or poverty remains. In contrast, the protagonist, who lives in present time, is a victim of sex, race, and class discrimination. The persons of the future feel sorry for her, because no one in her society offers to her the respect and love she so desperately needs.

In *Small Changes* Piercy shows Beth's and Miriam's inability to comprehend this conception of androgyny. Beth and Miriam do not convey the impression that they feel responsible for the creation of such an androgynous society. For although they are involved in changing their own psyches, they are not involved in political action. This absence of collective action leaves all of the individual women unprotected. For example, Wanda must confront the custody decision made by the judge with only a

few friends to help her. Once she solves her individual case by kidnapping the children and living in hiding, no movement remains to persuade the legal system to accept the idea of lesbian mothers. Obviously, many laws and institutional structures have to be changed before wholeness becomes a reality, and there must be political support for making those changes. As Sara Blackburn commented in a review of *Small Changes* in *The New York Times Book Review*, "The problem of how to transform the cultural conditioning of women . . . is inseparable from transforming the lives of all the exploited and the structure of the society that keeps them that way" (3). Piercy's characters fail to make political connections as clearly as they should, and, worse than that, they fail to see the need for considerable collective action beyond the boundaries of the commune.

The final and most important conception of androgyny in relation to *Small Changes* is that of spiritual androgyny, which requires seeing life itself as a whole—as organic, interdependent, and sacred. It requires an attitude of respect and awe for what is alive and life-giving. Miriam has this attitude to some extent, for she rebels against the life-denying work she is asked to do on military contracts and so quits her job. But Miriam fails to turn her personal decision into a public statement; hence, it is deprived of its symbolic value. Unfortunately, she does not see herself as participating in what Mary Daly, in her book *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, refers to as "God-the-Verb," that is, "the process of becoming." Daly's notion of "androgynous being" involves the creation of "god"—or androgynous wholeness—both within the individual and the collective. Daly's "God" is not male nor up in heaven; it is an androgynous potential within the self and within society (26-27, 33-35). The realization of it requires a spiritual commitment to Life—a commitment to non-violent resistance to all that is destructive.

Perhaps it is because this larger spiritual commitment to the making of the "heaven on earth," or utopia, is missing and the implications of such a commitment not quite realized that Piercy's protagonists concentrate almost entirely upon saving themselves, not others. The necessary interaction between personal and collective growth does not occur. Miriam and Beth are not yet women-heroes.

Because Beth and Miriam strive against strong sexist forces, the changes in them remain small; and the central image of the

novel is not that of the strong woman-hero but that of the woman raped. The most powerful scene in the novel is Phil's description of his attempted participation in a gang rape (285-89). His inability to decide whether he feels more guilt because he intended to participate or because he suddenly became impotent and could not is symptomatic of the moral confusion of the American male. Other rapes are mentioned in the novel: Jim rapes Beth, Tom Ryan rapes Miriam, Jackson rapes Sissy, and Miriam's psychoanalyst, in a sense, rapes her mind. These incidents establish rape as the image that best represents the sexual politics displayed in the novel. Heroines get raped, but as women-heroes learn how to resist their attackers, their victimization will become less likely and the probability of androgyny will increase. A collective refusal to allow rape—whether it be physical or psychological—will restore female self-respect. Only then will future feminist novelists be able to write down Piercy's chapter title "Welcome to the Sexual Revolution" and not expect the reader to understand that it was intended ironically.

NOTES

¹Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope make a similar distinction between the heroine and the "female-hero" in the introduction to their anthology (2-12).

²See Marie Delcourt's *Hermaphroditea*, which discusses and shows photographs of statues of these god / goddesses. To see one, visit the first floor of the Louvre.

³For a discussion of Genesis 1:26-28 and the androgynous godhead, see June Singer 93-100.

⁴For a brief discussion of Taoism in relation to androgyny, see Nancy Topping Bazin and Alma Freeman 190-91.

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The Utopian Vision of Marge Piercy in *Woman on the Edge of Time*

KAREN C. ADAMS

Visions of utopia have usually been presented by males and have been concerned with governments, economics, and social classes. The utopian novel as handled by women is a newer version of futuristic vision. *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915) is one strong feminist view of a new society. In the recent past Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is another vision of what might come to be. Feminist views on utopian society are needed in this period when there are no models for the changes that are occurring at a rapid rate.

One question to be asked is whether Piercy's Mattapoisett is actually a utopia in the traditional sense of the word. Northrup Frye, in his essay "Varieties of Literary Utopias," distinguishes differences between Arcadia, utopia, and the pastoral tradition (41). In Arcadia people are integrated with the physical environment. Diverse social ideals may exist, but the common aim is a society where all desires can be instantly gratified—a Land of Cockayne idea. Utopia usually contains a city and supports the idea of human ascendancy over nature. In the pastoral tradition a desirable society is one that is greatly simplified. Using this terminology, we find that Mattapoisett, a village of 600 people in Massachusetts in the year 2137, is pastoral, Arcadian to an extent (instant gratification not being strong in a society where one may wait six years to study a special area with a particular teacher), and utopian to an extent. It is not a city. In fact, no more big cities exist because they were found not to work. There is not so much human ascendancy over nature as there is an accommodation to the rhythms and patterns found in nature. For reasons of clarity, however, Piercy's novel will be called utopian here because of its vision of a new future—a wish for a society to be better than it now is.

What does utopia look like from Piercy's vision? It shares with