

SOMETHING
out of
PLACE
WOMEN
AND
DISGUST
Eimear McBride

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Again, for Éadaoin

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

Published in association with Wellcome Collection

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collection**

183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE
www.wellcomecollection.org

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Elena by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 286 9
eISBN 978 1 78283 572 1



FOR STARTERS

As I type the female population of the world stands at 3,859,840,727, making women about 49.6% of the global population and meaning there are a lot of us around. Everyone knows a woman or has at the very least been brought into the world by one. We're always there as well, in the shops, down the pub. We can often be seen on hospital wards, public transport, in sports arenas or on the telly. You will find us both working and shopping at Asda. Some of us are astrophysicists. Some of us run dry-cleaning businesses. We are engineers and teachers, local councillors and orthodontists. We can frequently be found in our homes shouting at our children or on the other end of a call centre line, being shouted at. Sometimes we are even responsible for feeding time at the

zoo. The truth of the matter is that women are pretty much everywhere, doing all kinds of stuff, all the time.

Given our louring omnipresence then, what might be the origin of all this disgust that's so continually directed towards us? By 'disgust' I mean the disgust that appears to mystically attach itself to the female body at birth – although sometimes too upon the mere determination of sex in the womb – and then proceeds to pursue that body right through each stage of its being, especially the later ones though, it should be said.

How has this disgust managed to settle itself in as a kind of default reaction to almost every aspect of women's lives – being sometimes rampant and ill-concealed, while at others, insidious and almost imperceptible?

Certainly, it performs its abhorrence so diligently – enthusiastically even – that a constant alertness to disgust's objections and proposed limitations has become one of the great, inexorable presences in those lives. It's there in the proprietorial,

fetishistic attitudes towards how we look, what we weigh and what we wear, to the ways we think about the world, how our bodies experience the world or are forced to experience the world. Sometimes the disgust is expressed broadly and unthinkingly. Sometimes viciously and particularly. Economically and politically. Culturally and religiously. But always damagingly, and consequentially. As women contain within our vast numbers as much variety of race and sexuality, size and shape, physical ability and disability, intellectual capacity and stupidity, wellness and illness, talents and deficits as the male population, what possible excuse can there be for our being held to this additional standard of 'not arousing disgust'? A problem further complicated by the fact that, radical surgery aside, our bodies cannot but be what they are and do what they do. And, although we have neither say in the constituent parts of this standard nor right of veto over it, we will most certainly bear the brunt of any failure to attain it.

And I'm tired of this, bored by it and constantly infuriated by the barefaced presumption of it. What follows here are my thoughts on the possible origins of this intangible, yet undeniable, disgust, what purposes its evolution might serve and who its beneficiaries must be.

But one more thing before setting out, if sometimes I write as if women all come from the same place and time, or have the same concerns and the same prohibitions placed upon them, this is only a shorthand for noting areas of shared difficulty rather than an assertion of uniformity. I know we are not all the same and that, even though we are sometimes treated as such, women do not run as a herd. One size does not fit all, any more than one history speaks for all or one experience represents all. This is simply an essay, a collection of thoughts, not an objective work of academic research, and so, by its very nature, subjective. Where there are gaps in nuance and knowledge, I hope others will fill them in and push the

parameters of the debate further. I do not doubt there is more than enough disgust to go round. This is just my shift, my turn to contribute to an argument that stretches back and forward as far as the eye can see.

DISGUST AND TABOO

First then to the thorny matter of disgust itself. What is it and how do we experience it? It certainly bears a close resemblance to repulsion in its intense distaste for and aversion to specific objects or people. However, where repulsion still allows us – albeit unwillingly – to tolerate the repulsive object, disgust does not. This may be because disgust's roots lie in a more visceral, animal instinct to avoid contact with that which we suspect to be physically harmful to us.

One of humankind's earliest assertions of self is the refusal to put certain foods in our mouths. While, in reality, these foods are unlikely to be detrimental to our health, our personal disgust monitor registers

something unacceptable in their appearance, odour or texture which forces us to reject them. As anyone who has ever been charged with feeding a young child knows, once their sense of disgust has been aroused the difficulty of levering in a forkful of broccoli or scrambled egg, or whatever foodstuff has offended, between those unwilling jaws becomes close to insurmountable.

Rachel Herz, the author of *That's Disgusting: Unravelling the Mysteries of Repulsion*, has described this physical disgust as 'a scientific amalgamation of terror management, and avoidance of pathogens and oral incorporation', which seems to accurately capture the sense of dread and urgent need for escape which any disgust reaction immediately provokes. Taking this a step further, in his aptly titled *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller expands on the reach of disgust, suggesting:

things or deeds we find disgusting put us in the world of disgust when we have

the sense that we would not be surprised should we start feeling queasy or nauseated, whether or not we actually do so. Disgust surely has a feel to it; that feel, however, is not so much of nausea as of the uneasiness, the panic, of varying intensity, that attends the awareness of being defiled.

Miller's idea of disgust as a harbinger of defilement is perhaps closest to the congenital disgust for women and their bodies that interests me, in that it neatly illuminates some of the irrational behaviours exhibited by misogynists in both public and private forums.

But, if this is indeed the case, what is it about women that prompts such feelings of defilement? Feelings strong enough to, apparently, justify male intervention and corrective treatment for what is, after all, the business of women's own lives and bodies? Are we ourselves an unwitting trigger with our, oh-so-modern, insistence

that menstruation, possession of the equipment for pregnancy and birth, and the having of a vagina rather than a penis are not in themselves acceptable reasons for dismissing us wholesale from the centres of power? Or is our continual belittlement into the sum of our unavoidable physical characteristics, and biological functions, just a conveniently insidious form of backlash – easily invoked, inclusive of every woman on the planet, devastating in effect and impossible to refute? In many ways it's a clever ploy because in order to provoke disgust in others, logic insists that women must indeed be essentially disgusting.

Perhaps it would help to look at something else which is both naturally occurring and a dependable trigger of disgust? What about dirt then? It certainly carries with it the same concept of defilement and provokes a similar instinct to avoid. No one wants to hear dirt's side of the story and, as for having to suffer an unwelcome presence in every area of your life, well, what could be more

disgusting than dirt? Women being treated like dirt is hardly an alien concept either. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, British anthropologist Mary Douglas states: 'If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place.' A slice of cake on a plate is not dirt. A slice of cake on the toilet floor, is. The essential nature of the cake remains cakelike wherever it is; the change in its status is caused by our reaction to its placement.

In later editions, Douglas attributed the phrase 'matter out of place' to the etiquette-fixated eighteenth-century statesman Lord Chesterfield – although it was also a phrase widely used in nineteenth-century debates about the growth of cities. While neither the phrase's ostensible originators nor Douglas herself were writing about women or feminism, there is relevance in Douglas's interest in why specific taboos – taboo being the natural ally and logical correlative

of disgust – come into force at certain times in certain societies and can, just as quickly, be consigned to the dustbin of history. Take this paragraph then from Douglas’s preface to the 2002 edition of the book:

The study of taboo impinges inevitably upon the philosophy of belief. The taboo-maintained rules will be as repressive as the leading members of the society want them to be. If the makers of opinion want to prevent freemen from marrying slaves, or want to maintain a complex chain of inter-generational dynastic marriages, or they want to extort crushing levies – whether for the maintenance of the clergy or for the lavish ceremonials of royalty – the taboo system that supports their wishes will endure. Criticism will be suppressed, whole areas of life become unspeakable and, in consequence, unthinkable. But when the controllers of opinion want a different way of life, the taboos will lose credibility and their

selected view of the universe will be revised.

Although the term taboo itself only dates back to the 1770s, the idea of the intransgressible social, cultural or religious prohibition has always been with us and remains fully active today. The fanciful assumption in many, post-Cold War, Western democracies that all the old social, racial and sexual taboos had gone the way of the dodo, and that the widespread imposition of taboos had become an obsolete method of communal control, has been given a short, sharp shock in recent years. One need cast only a cursory eye over Twitter to be assured that those who attract the attention of our continuously evolving, contemporary system of taboo, whether by accident or design, are probably more keenly aware than ever of the consequence of falling foul of its evangelical enforcers. Gleeful cancelling, no-platforming, dog-piling, doxxing and the pursuit of individuals beyond the confines of social

media into their physical and professional lives are just a few of the outcomes that await those guilty of expressing any but the most non-committal opinions or positions. As women are by far the most regularly targeted group on all platforms, across all subjects and on either side of whichever argument is raging, it's hard not to draw the conclusion that this is contemporary patriarchy exerting its considerable influence over the instigation of new taboos in order to dish out behavioural correctives to women in a highly visible and public manner. The urgency and increasing vehemence with which these taboos are being devised and disseminated can surely be read as a bare-faced backlash against the seismic shift in women's fortunes over the last century or so.

LUCKY BITCHES!

Nowadays, the parameters of our lives are no longer necessarily bounded by the social and familial expectations we were once

unquestioningly reared to fulfil, as though the epitaphs for our gravestones had already been carved at birth. The momentousness of closing that distance, between our enslaved or ensnared historical selves and the unbounded futures we wanted to make possible for ourselves and our daughters, was seminal and means we can never again reassume those old roles in a credulous, uninformed state. In truth, we have been changed in a fundamental way and have travelled too far to go back. But, although that Rubicon has crossed, we must remain on our guard against the forces which would really much prefer to make us turn around and march all the way back into our sculleries again.

A hundred years of hard-won, and still inadequately realised, liberation then is a short time indeed when compared to the millennia of female oppression we drag behind and what we have gained is still so new, and so fragile, it must be rigorously protected from the incessant assaults levelled at it by

an innately misogynistic system. Witness the self-satisfied line of men photographed with US President Donald Trump as he signed an executive order to ban funding of international groups who perform or provide information about abortion. To these powerful men, today's noisily enfranchised women are never less than a permanent source of aggravation, because the battles they have won have changed the very fabric of the lives those men can now legally lead. Gone are the days of blanket unaccountability for their actions towards women in the workplace and their unquestioned supremacy in the home. As dispiriting as the failure of Donald Trump's 'Grab 'em by the pussy' tape to exclude him from the presidency was, that so many thought it might, and should, was indicative of a huge cultural shift from the days in which it would have been unthinkable for John F. Kennedy's sexual misdeeds to be aired in public by the press. Women's toppling of the traditional male 'masters of the universe' narratives

of yore brought not only change for themselves but for all concerned, whether it was welcome or not. After all, Harvey Weinstein bestrode the entertainment industry like a colossus until some brave women put their small, seemingly insignificant, selves in his way and a generation was galvanised as a result. Basic reason suggests those who have been cast out from that consequenceless Eden are unlikely to be grateful for the forced recalibration of their entitlements. It is surely even to be expected that they would not give such privileges up without a fight or easily forgive those who have inflicted this injurious repositioning upon them. And, in an environment in which all-out aggression can no longer be publicly utilised as the first line of defence, might the imposition of taboo provide a promising point of departure for the backlash? Taboo certainly shifts the argument from the what to the who and, as such, makes it all the harder to refute in a collective, definitive way. Mary Douglas says, 'A polluting person is

someone who has crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone,' which seems about right.

So, having crossed the line, indeed having changed the very lie of the line, women have unleashed danger for those who cannot, or will not, accept that change. I imagine it comforts these pillars of the old world to think of women as 'matter out of place' and treat us with all the disgust that they feel we are now, by their logic, due.

Which brings us back to dirt. To be seen as dirt or treated as dirt is shaming and the reason shame works so well as a weapon is that, as the Catholic Church discovered centuries ago, its ability to work on the individual has a far greater reach, and impact, than direct authoritarianism can manage. Unlike guilt, which relies on an individual recognising and regretting their transgression, shame operates from the inside. Shame comes about when the individual has cause to regret not only what they have done

but who they, fundamentally, are. To feel shame suggests becoming conscious of an innate flaw, an inappropriate, unacceptable element of the self, which cannot be simply apologised for and moved on from. It must be concealed and denied at all costs and, because of this, shame becomes the weapon within. Its nature is self-perpetuating and inescapable and its effects as devastating as they are invisible to the external eye. Ask any victim of sexual abuse what difficulties they encounter after the initial physical trauma is over and you will be left in no doubt about the catastrophic consequences shame can inflict on a life.

Shame has for so long been the default setting for women, instilled early on, drunk in with the metaphorical mother's milk of our society, that it is often hard to differentiate where shame and an authentic sense of self begin and end. But we have, at least, embarked upon the journey of disentanglement now and are, therefore, travelling farther down along it all the time. Perhaps

one day we may even arrive at a place in which a blanket refusal to own the stain that shame suggests we possess becomes the natural default, clicking into action from the very outset of life? In order for that to be achieved, however, it's crucial that the sources and sites of that shame are identified. While this is no straightforward task, there is little ambiguity about the place of its first manifestation: the body and, specifically, the body of the girl.

This is where the valuelessness innate to objects of disgust is first grafted on to the lives of women, when they are still children and wholly reliant on the adult world to tell them what they are or can aspire to be. A few years ago, when my daughter was still young enough to watch the children's TV show *Paw Patrol* – in which a group of six dogs run around doing helpful things – I remember her earnestly asking why only one of the dogs was a girl. She also asked why the girl dog had to wear pink but that's for another essay. In that moment, though,