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Herself Beheld is a book-length meditation on women and mirrors. For the purpose of her book JeniJoy La Belle (who is a professor of literature at Caltech) has gathered her material from literary sources, mainly in the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the contentions underlying *Herself Beheld* is that the best texts, judged by literary-critical criteria, will have the most sensitive analyses of mirror scenes. La Belle's extraordinarily wide range of examples convincingly bears out this contention.

Herself Beheld is literary criticism which contains, or tends towards, some controversial propositions of a sexual-

political nature. It is possible to admire the one, while demurring at certain aspects of the other. The first thing to say is that La Belle is a fine critic with a fine sensibility and an exceptionally fine turn of phrase. One reads *Herself Beheld* with a constant pleasure in the writing. The author's style moves between epigrammatic terseness and belletristic copiousness. It is never less than lucid, and a frequent felicity of expression suggests that La Belle might as easily find herself on the other side of the fence, with the creative rather than the critical authors. An example from the first chapter (wittily entitled "Introductory Reflections") gives a flavor of the book's prose:

Female characters [in literature] view themselves in various kinds of mirrors. They peer at their reflections in wavy-surfaced mirrors, examine themselves from every angle in swinging mirrors, nod to their faces in silver-backed hand glasses, twirl in front of triple mirrors. They regard themselves in the demoralizing glasses in ladies' rooms. They lean close to mirrors studded with incandescent bulbs. Passing shops, they catch glimpses of themselves in polished panes. They pull thin rectangular mirrors out of their pocket-books. They use windows as dark mirrors when the daylight dies.

It continues for another page, as the author tumbles out her eloquent catalog of the multitudinous relationships that women have with these reflective surfaces that mean so much to them.

On other occasions, instead of compacting her illustrations into a list, La Belle will examine a particularly telling

mirror scene at length, or return to it a number of times. Her extended discussions of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* I found most illuminating. Judged purely as an exercise in critical commentary, *Herself Beheld* is admirable.

The fascination of this book is that it goes beyond critical commentary to consider what it is to be a woman in the modern world. As an essay on the sociology of femaleness, *Herself Beheld* is consistently shrewd and (in dealing with theorists like Lacan and Eco) intellectually sophisticated. But some of La Belle's theses are provocative. She takes as axiomatic, for example, that men and women use mirrors in quite different ways. "What women do with mirrors," she tells us, "is clearly distinct and psychically more important than what men do with mirrors in their pursuit of generally utilitarian goals." Men, she claims, *use* mirrors; to shave, to check that their ties are straight or that their hair is tidy. Women, by contrast "explore the reaches of the mirror for what they really are." A woman's engagement with her mirror involves her deepest identity. But "when a man stands before a mirror, he is usually there for a practical purpose."

I wonder. I have, for instance, a 15-year-old son who spends what seems to me a major part of his waking life looking into mirrors. If there is a practical purpose in this inspection, I have yet to find out what it is. And I suspect, from what I see there, that the mirror in the men's room of the Athenaeum receives as much purely narcissistic gaze as its next-door neighbor.

Another controversial thesis in *Her-*

self Beheld is that the act of looking into the mirror is, for the woman, as exploratory and self-defining as the acts of reading and writing. In other words, the mirror is a royal road to enlightenment and emancipation. "Texts and mirrors," La Belle tells us, "can perform similar psychological functions for women." Which means, a wag might argue, that classes in the proper use of the mirror would be as valuable to the humanistic enterprise as Freshman Literature. It will be hard to get that one past the curriculum committee.

Herself Beheld winds up with a chapter entitled "A Mirror of One's Own." The allusion, of course, is to Virginia Woolf's famous polemic, "A Room of One's Own" which argues that personal, private space is a necessary precondition for the liberation of women. La Belle would furnish Woolf's room with a full-length mirror. Traditionally, feminists have tended to see mirrors as part of the apparatus of male tyranny, and breaking the tyrannous looking glass is, in the received view, a necessary act of deliverance. No, argues La Belle. The mirror should instead be used as a weapon. She further argues that this emancipating use of the mirror is already happening: "instead of throwing the mirror away, women are making it into a more flexible tool. By taking the mirror into their own hands, women are eliminating the mirror as tyrant, as dominant male." It's heady stuff. Not everyone will agree with La Belle, but this is a book whose impact will surely be felt well beyond the specialist readership of lit-crit.

John A. Sutherland
Professor of Literature