

Not without Honor

SALLY VINCENT on a poet who's fighting MAD

SEVEN years ago a young American woman wrote a piece of polemic which she called a poem, wherein she coined the phrase of phrases to describe the self-defeating nature of the female condition. Women's affliction, she said, was M. A. D. M for Male, A for Approval, D for Desire.

M. A. D., she said, was what paralyzes us, the hook upon which we were snared, the filter (or words to this effect) through which we perceived ourselves, the main cog in the great Art Delivery Machine which is ninety-nine and forty-four hundredths per cent pure male-controlled. We must fight our M. A. D. ness together, write our own poems/lives, before we all plummet down the behavioural sink and go entirely gibbering barking crazy.

Honor Moore's polemic has since become something of an American classic. A sort of Feminist Desiderata, in poster form it decorates the studios and work rooms of women artists who daily bless Honor Moore for her inspiration. Rather more men are not so keen. Perhaps they feel badly about the prospect of not having their approval sought high and low. One critic was so incensed by M. A. D. sentiments that when he came to review a play written by a man known to be romantically linked with Miss Moore, he opined the work would have been better 'loved he not Honor Moore,' which had a whole continent of traditionalists rocking to the exquisite relevance of its wit.

'Did he really say that?' said Honor Moore, pulling one mauve woolly sock up out of her sneaker and smoothing it over a plump, white calf. 'I barely remember.' She is not a lady to bear a grudge. She is the exceedingly gently bred eldest daughter of the Episcopalian Bishop of New York; sweet voiced, sweet smiling, the ostensible essence of upper-class American womanhood. When she says she has lived and worked as a poet these past 10 years; that she is a poet, you could easily take her for a word-weaver of hearts and flowers and other acceptably feminine notions. Such an assumption would not take into account the historical facts of the past 15 years and poets, especially female ones, are far too pragmatic to blinker themselves against facts.

The content of Honor Moore's work is the mirror image of the content of Honor Moore. Blood and guts, vagina, Her Mother's Moustache, a struggle for female autonomy, an awareness of female consciousness; scarcely topics to delight the minds of mainstream culturalists. 'She writes like T. S. Eliot,' remarked a critic of her first play just before he exhorted audiences to stay away from it. Who wants to listen to all her grief? he rationalised.

Of course she would prefer it, she says, if she had come to London and found that her



Honor Moore: No grudges

poetry-reading schedule did not include the stricture 'Women Only' at least three times in a week. She is not herself a separatist, but on the other hand she can easily appreciate the vulnerability of a movement that continues to need to protect itself inside its own exclusivity from time to time. The Women's Movement ('All it means is women moving') was what first gave her permission and support and space to begin to try to write, she cannot now deny other women their beginnings and, if they feel more comfortable without men, too bad. There would not have been feminist magazines if men had accepted and printed women's poetry and articles for their publications, nor feminist theatre if women's plays had been performed in their theatres, nor exclusively feminist sensibility in a world where male sensibility was the only valued commodity.

Living

THE OBSERVER, SUNDAY 15 MARCH 1981

'A feminist,' said Honor Moore, 'is only someone who believes it is not healthy for women to live by serving others at the expense of having their own lives.' It doesn't mean they shouldn't have children, rather it suggests they might gain more strength to nurture if they first took up the responsibility of nourishing themselves. 'What do women mean?' she wonders, 'when they take for granted their careers, their independence, equal pay for equal work, their right to lead adult lives—and who then say "I'm not a Feminist" as though they were denying secondary male characteristics.'

The ironies are obvious, the answer her own, seven-year-old manifesto; many, many women continue to be hamstrung by the habit of seeking male approval before their own felt needs. Old priorities die

hard and the struggle has been laid aside twice before in this century. But she has seen feminism work and, even while it is shallowly denied, it is, if not the answer to all our ills, better than nothing. Like Galileo she has experienced the revelation that the Earth is not the centre of the universe; that a man, however much you love him, is not the centre of your life. She has even written a poem to celebrate it.

At 35 and living in New York City, she now sees young men become fathers and share the nurturing of their children with their wives, as to the manner born. Not merely the story-reading, kindly though aloof attentions of the father of her own childhood, but the real thing; nappy-changing, spoon-feeding, mouth-wiping, nonsense-listening, day-long care and attendance. Curiously, though, the old image of the Feminist as a man-hating, barren harridan grows more discreet as the messages she first voiced become assimilated in ordinary life.

'We've got the Pro-Life Movement in America now,' said Honor Moore, as though exchanging womanly pleasantries over a nice hot cup of peppermint tea. 'Which goes hand in glove with the Total Woman Movement. We've got Nancy. Nancy Reagan has told us—or perhaps Ronald has, on Nancy's behalf—that the high-spot of her sense of personal achievement, the most wondrous moments of her life, have been experienced while sitting inside her husband's house and hearing his footsteps approaching from outside.'

'It's fairly glorious that. His Feet . . .' she trailed off on a dying fall, quickly excused as jet-lag.

'Do you have light bulb jokes here?' she asked. 'Q: How many Californians does it take to change a light bulb? A: Three—one to screw it in, two to share the experience.' Regular readers of *Observatory* in these pages already know the other ones she told me. Not this one, though. Q: How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb? A: (delivered in hoarse shriek) THAT'S NOT FUNNY!

The Birmingham Post

Thursday, March 5, 1981

"'Mourning Pictures' is expressed with meditative force and subtlety..... Monstrous Regiment's music, composed by Tony Haynes and played by him and Josefina Cupido on a wonderful variety of percussion instruments.....makes one hope it might commission Mr. Haynes to write what I imagine would be the first feminist opera."