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Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts

Feminist Essays

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This book is dedicated
to Dale Spender,
who is showing us the way.
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Introduction

Life and theory are both notoriously slippery and, since the author doesn’t live her life according to feminist theory, but draws her feminist theory from her life (among other things), there’s much about the following essays I’d now like to change.

I have been haunted throughout the writing of these diverse pieces (especially the ones about pornography and the one entitled “Not for Years but for Decades”) by a feeling of not coming to grips with the rock-bottom of the subject. I think I now know why.

Contemporary feminist writing is fragmented and multifarious partly because there are so many questions and issues to be addressed and partly because our own feminist past has been in every case hidden from us, either through deliberate distortion, sheer re-invention, or total obliteration. Some earlier feminist movements like the suffrage movement in England were larger, more influential, and
more productive of radical theory than our own. Dale Spender’s wonderful, crucial new book, Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them¹ documents case after case of deliberate obliteration and reinvention—all women of achievement have received this treatment, not just feminists—and accumulates and articulates a comprehensive theory of feminism formed by the statement of its eighty-odd subjects (in her introductory chapters Spender says she had to stop her research arbitrarily when she began to run out of time and space, but that she never ran out of subjects).

Spender’s formulation of feminist theory isn’t final either, of course, but I’m going to propose as the primary demand of patriarchy what she chooses from Matilda Joslyn Gage (1873):² that women’s resources be available, non-reciprocally and without pay, to men. If men have an unreasonable and unjust double amount of authority (intellectual and other), self-esteem, time, energy, leisure, cultural importance, wealth, freedom, and so on, this is precisely because they have stolen our time, our energy, our leisure, our authority, our labor and the wealth it produces, our self-esteem, our claims to knowledge and achievement, and our possibilities for autonomy and freedom. We are not merely excluded from male activities and institutions; our resources have been appropriated by men as their own in a massive theft lasting for centuries.

I think questions of sexuality and pornography which are of so much concern to feminists today can be clarified and demystified. If what matters is men’s non-reciprocal access to women’s resources, then male lust and even male violence are not the basic issues; they are merely particular examples of the fundamental issue (though one could argue, accurately I think, that it is exactly non-reciprocal access to women’s resources, i.e., male dominance, that results in male violence and male coercion).

I want to use “pornography” throughout not as a value
judgment about particular material but merely to indicate commercial sexual fantasy sold largely to heterosexual men, of which some is violent and some is not and of which some is obviously contemptuous and hostile and some is not.

First, if and when pornography becomes a single-issue fight, that alone will be self-destructive. All single-issue fights are. The sheer length and frustration of the battle against any one manifestation of patriarchy will drive those women who focus on it alone to the point of accepting help from “allies” who subvert and undermine their activities, as Susan Anthony (according to Spender) became conservative in her later years and courted such “friends” as the racist and reactionary head of the W.C.T.U. Single-issue crusades inevitably “succeed” (like suffrage) at the cost of their radicalism, not because their proponents want this to happen but because public “success” demands the cutting off of any issue from its radical content and its wider radical context.

Second, I’d like to suggest that many of our current assumptions about pornography are not nearly radical enough. Some examples:

1. Pornography is bad because it’s violent and encourages violence against women.
2. Pornography is bad because it tells lies about women.
3. Pornography is bad because it’s caused by and encourages male lust, which (at least as constructed by the patriarchy) is violent and insatiable.
4. Pornography is bad because it presents women as degraded and humiliated.

I'd like to make here what I think is an important point: that the above statements lead to confusions in logic. For example, what about material that isn’t violent (it certainly exists)? What about the evidence that violent male youngsters and adults don’t read what we commonly see as violent pornography, but a small, specialized group of maga-
zines like *True Detective*? (My authority for this is Rae Larson of SISTER—the Seattle Institute for Sex Therapy, Education, and Research.) What about the evidence that much of our mass literature, television, and movies encourages violence against women even more subtly and pervasively than pornography?

If pornography is bad because it tells lies about women, is it any worse—or even any different—from the rest of the culture? Patriarchal ideology and culture are nothing but lies about women. I think we often forget this simply because it’s so absolutely pervasive in everything from clothing to the design of houses to the structure of cities (anti-children and anti-women). And if pornography could be re-designed by main force so that it did tell some anatomical and emotional truths, would that make it acceptable? It would still represent the total availability of women’s resources (not only women’s bodies, but women’s energy and time) to men.

And that’s what’s wrong with it and would be wrong with it even if we could re-design it so that it avoided the obvious feminist objections of violence, contempt, and untruth. In this male-dominant culture, men who can’t or don’t want to buy women’s resources (including women’s bodies) via marriage or some kind of commitment, or rent women’s bodies, energies, and time via prostitution, can nonetheless buy fantasies of having access to women’s resources, i.e. pornography.

Perhaps the worst result of isolating discussions of pornography from basic feminist theory is what happens when we try to decide if a particular piece of material is or is not acceptable. Much material is perfectly clear—women being cut up by chainsaws, for example—but what about the recent feminist-authored code which listed under women being degraded or humiliated, “women inviting penetration”? This is the sort of detail that can keep us going for months; I
myself can't see "inviting penetration" as in any way degrading or humiliating per se—except of course that we still live in a culture that believes coitus to be symbolic of male dominance and that talks about penetration rather than "the capture of the penis." The bitter debates of the last few years seem to be worst when there is argument of this sort. I believe that such questions, like the anti-feminist question about abortion, "When does life begin?", are basically unanswerable—and that's why they are asked. There is no such thing in a male-dominant culture as "acceptable pornography," no matter what rules it follows, and forgetting that can only lead us into endless snarls—as in my own essays that follow.

Moreover, I now believe that male sexuality per se has very little to do with any of these questions. The few talks friends of mine have had with men who were willing to drop macho pretensions, at least temporarily, Phyllis Chesler's About Men, as well as thirty-seven years of listening to male sexual bragging, have made me absolutely certain that men's insistence on women's "attractiveness" and sexual availability has nothing to do with either carnality or aesthetics. For one thing, "attractiveness" in women changes too fast and too often (this decade's fashion is next decade's hilarity) to have any deep connection with male instinct. Moreover, men make it clear that the way undorned women actually smell, feel, and look (which surely arouses lust in conditions of actual copulation) is exactly what is not acceptable otherwise. What is demanded is that you "make something of yourself." Sometimes this means being artificially thin or girdled and sometimes it means being artificially fat and padded, but it always means being unnatural and uncomfortable. What it also always means is giving off signals of the availability of your energies, time, emotions, and resources to men, that is, your loyalty to the patriarchal order.
In short, the demand for “attractiveness,” like the existence of pornography, is sexual harassment, nothing more and nothing less.

There is a confusion that bedevils all women, from the youngsters who think they can avoid sexism by finding “the right man” to the political theorists (like myself in the past) who assume that women’s oppression consists always of personal contacts with individually villainous men. Something like that seems to be haunting sexual issues now. It is simply not true, for example, that all women in the sex industry were forced into it and all are exploited. Similarly the image of all prostitutes as victims forced into the trade by violence or destitution (or kidnapped) will not withstand the evidence. If we object only to personal victimization and exploitation, or only to violence and humiliation, we won’t always find them—and what then? Do we withdraw our objections? I hope not! Looking for personal confrontations and extreme cases of violence or coercion leaves us without theory and therefore helpless in the face of male-dominated institutions, some of which look relatively benign and most of which are run not by open violence or coercion, but by “normal,” even “polite” ordinary behavior practiced by “nice,” “polite,” “tactful,” even “pleasant,” men.

There are many subtle ways of giving one’s time and energy to the patriarchy, and one (it seems to me) is to become over-occupied with male psychology, i.e. male violence, male sexuality, and the causes of male attitudes and male behavior. Even those of us who detest the patriarchy still find it difficult to become morally free of male power, of the massive and constant pull of men’s centrality, men’s importance, and the supposed “profound” causes of men’s behavior. (Men themselves are awfully fond of analyzing the deep psychology of their own, male misbehavior, especially to feminists!)

What about my earlier self, with her statement that
“Sometimes I’m attracted to men I humanly like”? Was this real carnal arousal or was it merely a compound of guilt at not doing my job, the adoration of male normativeness and primacy and the uneasy, minimal arousal I finally understood and described in the first part of “Pornography and the Doubleness of Sex for Women”?

The “old dykes” who boast of their friendships with gay men, the women who cluster round pro-feminist men (real or otherwise) radiating gratitude and praise, the Lesbians who talk endlessly about their attraction to men and their “bisexuality,” when the psychology of genuinely bisexual women is quite different, all who allow fear to impress them morally or make them lie to themselves, who keep in their hearts not affection, not even concern, but adulation of the heroic, normative, central sex—all these are betraying themselves and other women.

To lose the connection to fundamental theory and to evaluate discrete bits of personal behavior as feminist or non-feminist (whether they’re male or female), is self-destructive and dreadfully confusing. Feminism isn’t a grab bag of all the good and nice things in the world (as some, albeit a very few, feminists sometimes seem to think) and patriarchy isn’t a collection of personally nasty behavior and all the bad things in the world. Nor is feminism a set of rules for virtuous living. To believe the former leads to helplessness in the face of institutionalized patriarchy and believing the latter leads to otherwise intelligent women boggling about absurdities, e.g. whether round Tarot cards are anti-authoritarian (I saw this statement seriously received, though I think—I hope—it was a gentle joke) or that vaginal stimulation is “male-identified” rather than being a matter of female desire and female anatomy.

We’ve been right to mistrust patriarchal theory (especially about ourselves) but feminist theory, just as broad and just as analytically sharp and accurate as we can get it, is a
crucial necessity. It's fatally easy in the heat of the moment to forget what feminist theory is—after all, the patriarchy gives us plenty of help on this point! Please don't think I offer you the following essays as illustrations of accurate theory; most of them (except for "Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement") now seem to me more warnings—go thou and do otherwise!—than examples.

But I may be too hard on my past self. You decide.

—November, 1984

NOTES


4. For example, it can be argued that commercial pornography for women exists. The feminist point of view would examine the cultural myths in such pornography (e.g. Rosemary Rogers' novels) and find whether the same myth of male hegemony were being sold to both sexes.

Not For Years
But For Decades

I. FACT

When I was twelve I fell in love with Danny Kaye. For almost a quarter of a century I have regarded that crush as the beginning of my sexual life. But “sexual” is a dangerous word precisely because it splits one part of experience off from the rest. It was only when I began to ask, not about “sex” or my “sex life” but (more vaguely) about my “feelings” and about “emotional attachments” that I began to recall other things, some earlier, that the official classifications of “sex” censored out and made unimportant. Perhaps that’s the function of official classifications. Names are given to things by the privileged and their naming is (wouldn’t you think?) to their own advantage, but in the area of sexuality women are emphatically not a privileged class. So let’s ask about “friends.”
At eleven I played erotic games with girl friends, acting out nominally heterosexual stories I (usually) had made up. One script (minus the kissing and touching we added to it) I showed my mother, who praised it but laughed until she cried at one stage direction, which has a lover climbing a rope ladder to his sweetheart’s window, being discovered by her parents, and gloomily exiting by climbing back down the ladder. About this time I went on my First Date with a nice, plain, gentle, thoroughly dull little boy called Bill (we called him “Bill the Hill”). The necking he wanted to do bored me, but I was tremendously proud of having a First Date. At about that time, one winter’s evening, one of my girl friends seductively and skittishly insisted on kissing us all good night; that night I dreamed I was being led further and further into a dark forest by an elf who was neither a girl nor a boy, rotting oranges as big as people hung on the trees, and when a storm began, I woke in terror, knowing perfectly well that I had dreamed about my friend and that I was feeling for her what ought to go on with Bill the Hill. I told my mother about it and she “handled it very well” (as my analyst said many years later).

She said it was “a stage.”

That summer I was in summer camp and all the twelve-year-old girls in the bunk necked and petted secretly (with each other) but the next summer everybody seemed to have forgotten about it. Certainly nobody mentioned it. Everybody remembered the “dirty jokes” we had told every night for hours (grotesquely heterosexual or homophobic stories I thought the other children had invented) and none of my friends had forgotten the (heterosexual) serial stories I had made up and which several other little girls continued. But that whole summer of fumbling with your best friend had become invisible. Since nobody else mentioned it, I never did either.

My “best friend” was Carol-Ellen. I called her my “best
friend,” not my “lover.” I had strong and sometimes painfully profound feelings about her and would have been miserably jealous if she’d preferred anyone else to me. Yet I never thought that I “loved” Carol-Ellen or that what we did was really “sex” (although it was somehow not only sex, but a far worse kind than the boys’ panty-rafts or girls staying out with boys after curfew). I never gave to what had happened between us the prestigious name of “love” (which might have led me to stand up for its importance) or the wicked-but-powerful name of “sex.” What I had begun to learn (in “it’s a stage”) continued that summer, that my real experience, undefined and powerful as it was, didn’t really exist. It was bad and it didn’t exist. It was bad because it didn’t exist.

Simultaneously with being mad about Carol-Ellen, I read Love Comics. I believed in them. (Everybody read them and everybody, I suspect, believed in them.) Like dating and movies and boys, they were about real love and real sex. I remember disliking them and at the same time not being able to stay away from them. They demanded things of me (looks, clothes, behavior) which I disliked, and they insisted on the superiority and importance of men in a way I detested (and couldn’t connect with any of the little boys I knew at camp). But they offered a very great promise: that if only I would sacrifice my ambitions and most of my personality, I would be given a reward—they called it “love.” I knew it was in some way “sexual.” And yet I also knew that those hearts and flowers and flashing lights when the characters kissed didn’t have anything to do with sex; they were supersex or ultrasex; they were some kind of transcendent ecstasy beyond ordinary life. They certainly didn’t have anything to do with masturbation, or with what Carol-Ellen and I were secretly doing together. I think now that the most attractive rewards held out by the Love Comics (and later by the movies, the books, and the psychoana-
lysts) was freedom from responsibility and hence freedom from the burdens of being an individual. At twelve I found that promise very attractive. I was a tall, overly-bright and overly-self-assertive girl, too much so to fit anybody's notions of femininity (and too bookish and odd to fit other children's ideas of an acceptable human being). If anybody needed an escape from the guilt of individuality, I certainly did. The Love Comics told me that when it came right down to it, I wasn't any different from any other woman and that once love came, I would no longer have to worry about being imprisoned in my lonely, eccentric selfhood. The hearts and flowers and the psychedelic flashing lights would sweep all that away. I would be "in love" and I would never have to think again, never agonize over being "unpopular," never follow my own judgment in the face of criticism, never find things out for myself. This is the Grand Inquisitor's promise and I think Germaine Greer is quite right to see in the cult of "romance" a kind of self-obliterating religion. I didn't know that at twelve, of course. Nor did I know enough to look at the comic books' copyright pages to see which sex owned them, published them, and even wrote them. But I believed. And if I hadn't gotten the message from comic books, I would still have gotten it (as I did later) from movies, books, and friends. Later on I would get the same message from several (not even one!) psychiatrists and psychology books. Nor did the High Culture I met at college carry a different message. The insistence on certain kinds of looks and behavior, the overwhelming importance of men, and the sacrifice of personality and individuality (as well as the promised rewards) were always the same. (The only thing college added was contempt for women—which didn't change the obligation to be "feminine.")

Ti-Grace Atkinson calls this the heterosexual institution.

Time passed. Carol-Ellen went to another camp. At four-
teen I felt for a male counselor of nineteen the vulnerability, awkwardness, and liking I've since learned to call "erotic tension." Somebody else asked him to the Sadie Hawkins Dance and I cried in the bathroom for three solid minutes. I didn't know him well and didn't feel for him with one-quarter of the intensity I had for Carol-Ellen, but this time I had an official name for what I was feeling; I called it "love." I think what drew me to him was his kindness and his lack of good looks, which made him seem, to me, like a fellow-refugee. He was embarrassed at the dance (about me, I suspect) and roared about, clowning, which disillusioned me. I don't believe Carol-Ellen could have disillusioned me; I knew her too well and she was too important to me. I don't remember his face or his name, although I remember Carol-Ellen's perfectly (possibly because I took good care to get a snapshot of her). And Carol-Ellen, though of course a fellow-creature, was not a fellow-refugee; she always seemed to me far too good-looking and personally successful for that, so much so that I wondered why nobody else noticed her beauty. I always felt graced by Carol-Ellen's picking me for her best friend; after all, she could've been friends with anybody. But somewhere in my feelings about Bernie (Sidney? Joe? Scottie?) was the disheartening feeling I came to recognize later in my dealings with men: He'll do.

The year before that, in junior high, an older boy of fifteen (a popular person whose acquaintance I coveted) complimented me on a scarf I was wearing and I responded as we always did in my family: "Thanks, I got it at..." He laughed, partly amused, partly critical. "I didn't ask you where you got it! After all, I'm not going to get one." I knew that I had made a social mistake, and yet my embarrassment and shame were mixed with violent resentment. I knew then that the manners I had been taught (they seemed to me perfectly good ones) were now wrong, and that I would have to learn a whole new set for "boys." It was unfair. It
was just like the Love Comics. I knew also that somewhere deep down I didn’t believe in the absolute duality of male and female behavior (in terms of which he’d criticized me) and that somewhere in the back of my mind, in a reserve of boundless arrogance, I was preparing revolutionary solutions for such people: *That’s false and I know it. And just you wait.*

Yet all of this: revolution, Lesbianism, what-have-you, took place in profound mental darkness. I wrote moody Lesbian poems about Carol-Ellen, played with the idea of being a Lesbian, a tremendously attractive idea but strictly a literary one (I told myself). I wrote a Lesbian short story, which worried my high school teacher into asking me if I had any “problems you want to talk about.” I knew the story had bothered him and felt wickedly pleased and very daring. The story itself was about a tall, strong, masculine, dark-haired girl (me) who falls in love with a short, slender, light-haired girl (?) and then kills herself by throwing herself off a bridge because the light-haired girl (although a Lesbian) will have nothing to do with her. I couldn’t imagine anything else for the two of them to do. A few months later I began a novel (without connecting it with the story): here the dark-haired girl has become a dark-haired young man and the two lovers do get together (here I could imagine something for them to do) although light-hair eventually breaks the love affair off. On what grounds? That she’s a Lesbian! The young man, by the way, does not kill himself.

At the same time I began to wonder what pregnancy felt like and to write poems about Being Female, which I thought meant having no mind and being immersed in some overwhelming, not necessarily pleasant experience which was much bigger than you were (no, I didn’t yet even know that D.H. Lawrence existed; it was Love Comics again). I fell in love with a male gay friend and went with him and his sister to the Village, where they adjured me to pretend I
was eighteen ("For God's sake, Joanna, put your hair up and wear earrings!") so that we could drink real liquor in a real bar. I had disturbing dreams about him in which he came to the door of my family's house in a dress and a babushka. (At the time I interpreted the dream as worry about his effeminate mannerisms. Now I'm not so sure.) Later, in my first year of college, he came to visit and I teased him into kissing me; it felt so good that the next day I insisted on going farther. The only place we could use was the dormitory lounge, and possibly because of the publicity of the location, things turned out badly; he got scared, I got nauseated, and after he left I spent a wretched hour surrounded by friends, who cheerfully told me that the first time was always rotten. The housemother, a youngish psychologist, told me the same thing, and when I told her about my feelings for women (I must've had them, although I can only remember telling her about them) she said I was "going through a stage."

Somehow, in a vague and confused way, I didn't believe that. I found Mademoiselle de Maupin, a nineteenth-century novel in which a woman disguises herself as a man and has a love affair with a woman and a man (I thought the man was a creep and was really only interested in the woman). I wore slacks and felt defiant and ashamed. I tried to find out about Lesbianism on campus and annoyed my friends ("This school is awful. Do you know there are Lesbians here?" "Where! Where!" "Oh, Joanna, really."). I acquired a "best friend" for whom I had painful, protective, profound feelings &c. without ever recognizing &c. I found another "elf" and followed her around campus at a distance, feeling embarrassed. I went out on dates, which were even more crucial than they had been in high school, and got kissed by various men, which mildly excited and not-so-mildly disgusted me. My "best friend" told me stories about Lesbianism in her high school, in which everyone was a Lesbian except her,
but when I wanted to go with her to a Lesbian bar in New York (over vacation) she wouldn’t, and when I desperately asked her to pretend we were lovers in front of a third person, whom I said I wanted to shock (I didn’t know myself at that point exactly what I was doing) she got very angry and upset.

So I gave up. It wasn’t real. It didn’t count, except in my own inner world in which I could not only love women but also fly, ride the lightning, be Alexander the Great, live forever, etc., all of which occurred in my poetry. I regarded this inner life as both crucially important and totally trivial, the source of all my vitality and yet something completely sealed off from “reality.” By now I had learned to define the whole cluster of feelings as “wanting to be a man” (something I had not thought of before college), and saw it simultaneously as a shameful neurotic symptom and an indication of how much more talented and energetic I was than other women. Women with “penis envy” (another collegiate enlightenment) were inferior to men but were somehow superior to other women although they were also wickeder than other women. My best friend thought so. The psychology books my mother read thought so. The movies seemed to think so. Two years later the second elf turned up one summer (we had become distant friends) and the whole business started all over again. I now recognized it as a recurrent thing. I laughed at it and called it “penis envy.” It was about at that time that I began the first of a long series of one-way infatuations with very macho men (these lasted into my thirties), agonizing experiences in which I suffered horribly but had the feeling that my life had become real and intense, even super-real, the feeling that I was being propelled into an experience bigger and more overwhelming than my own dreary life, a life I was beginning to detest. The first man I picked for this was my “best friend’s” fiancé. I kept the infatuation going, totally unre-
ciprocated, for almost a year. He left school, they split up. I managed to go out with him once (we necked) and felt, in immense erotic excitement, that if only he would love me I could submerge my individuality in his, that he was a “real man,” and that if I could only marry him I could give up “penis envy” and be a “real woman.”

It sounds just like Love Comics.

In high school I believed (along with my few friends) that college would see an end to the dating game, to the belief that women were inferior to men, and that intellectual women were freaks. But it was in college that I first got lectures about “being a woman” from boys I knew, and heard other women getting them, heard that so-and-so knew “how to be a woman,” and was surrounded by the new and ghastly paraphernalia of dress rules and curfews. (My parents had been extremely permissive about where I went and with whom.)

After my twelfth summer I had gone (very early) into a high school where I knew nobody; I became depressed. In college I became more depressed. I went to the school psychiatrist, who told me I had “penis envy” and was in love with my father. I was willing to agree but did not know what to do about it (he said, “Enjoy life. Go out on dates”) and became even more depressed. By the end of graduate school I no longer had problems with “feelings about women”; I felt nothing about anybody. Occasionally I slept with a short, gentle, retiring man for whom I felt affection but no desire; puzzlingly, the sex didn’t work. Later, when I got into my twenties and into psychoanalysis, and began to feel again, I “fell in love with” handsome macho men who didn’t know I existed; I hated and envied them. The more intense and unreal these one-way “love affairs” were, the more dead and flat my life became in between. (When the man was not inaccessible, I made sure I was.) I got married to a short, gentle, retiring pleasant man (He’ll do) and
worked very hard at sex, which I loathed. I fell in love with a male homosexual friend because he was so beautiful and his life was beautiful and I wanted to be part of his life. I certainly didn’t want to be part of my own life. I acquired a series of office jobs, none of which I could bear to keep (“Isn’t there anything you like about your job?” “Yes, lunch hour.”). I went into analysis because I was extremely depressed and very angry, and when my analyst asked (once) if I had homosexual feelings, I said “Oh, no, of course not,” without even thinking. Even if it hadn’t been nonsense, everybody knew that the real problem was men, so I thought endlessly about men, worried about men, worried (with the active help of my analyst) about the orgasms I wasn’t having with men, worried about my childhood, worried about my parents, all in the service of worrying about my relation to men. Nothing else mattered. When my analyst asked me if I enjoyed sex, apart from orgasm, I remember wondering mildly what on earth he meant. It’s quite possible that analysis did help me with my “dependency problems,” although for a man who urged me to be independent, he was remarkably little concerned at my being economically dependent on my husband; he thought that was O.K. I didn’t; for one thing my husband hated his job as much as I hated mine. He told me that my relationship with my mother was bad (I agreed) but when I talked about my father I would get so enraged (about all men, not just about that one) that he would become tolerantly silent and then tell me I was showing resistance. He once said that if I’d been born a boy, I could’ve turned out much worse: “You might have been homosexual.” He said that what had saved me from going really crazy in my childhood was my father’s love. He once remarked that I had intense friendships, and I said, “Yeah, I guess,” not at all interested. But apart from the two remarks I’ve noted we never talked about my homosexuality. We talked about my “frigidity.”
I remember someone in the group (I was in group therapy for years) asking me if my husband was a good lover, and my absolute, blank helplessness before that question. I remember analytic remarks that enraged and baffled me: that getting married showed "ego strength"—I had done it partly because I was running out of money and couldn't stand working, a motive of which I was bitterly ashamed and which I never told anybody; that it was surprising that my husband could "function sexually"—I had an impulse of absolute rage, which I suppressed; that I was afraid I would be physically hurt in the sex act—"No, I'm afraid I'll turn into a 'real woman';" "But you are a real woman"; that I could be "active" by telling my husband what to do to me; and that men and women had different social functions but the same dignity—"Yeah, separate but equal" and that one I actually said out loud.

If analysis did any good, it certainly did not do it in the area of sex. Perhaps having some stories published helped. Being invited to writers' conferences and, for the first time in my life, meeting people like myself helped. (Question: why is it so hard making friends in group therapy and so easy making friends at writers' conferences? Answer: because writers are crazy.) Years later when I heard the phrase "the iron has entered your soul" I entirely misunderstood it. I thought that when you passed a certain point in misery you could really take the misery into you and turn it into strength. Perhaps I did that somehow. I made the first genuine decision of my adult life and left my husband—I was panic-stricken, clearly a matter of "dependency problems" but also a matter of getting out of the heterosexual institution. I got a job I liked, partly by accident ("You mean they'll pay me for that?"). I learned to drive. I got a job in another city and left analysis. I was desperately lonely. I kept "falling in love" with inaccessible men until it occurred to me that I wanted to be them, not
love them, but by then feminism had burst over all of us. I stopped loving men ("It's just too difficult!") and in a burst of inspiration, dreamed up the absolutely novel idea of loving women. I thought at the time that my previous history had nothing to do with it.

Just before I left my husband I had a dream, which I still remember. (I had begun to have nightmares every night after we made love.) I was alone in a city at night, walking round and round a deserted and abandoned schoolhouse, and I couldn't tell if I was frightened because I was alone or frightened because I wasn't alone. This dark schoolhouse was surrounded by uncut grass and grass was growing in the cracks of the sidewalk. I sat down on the front steps, in a world unutterably desolate and deserted, wishing very hard for someone to take me away from there. Then a car, containing the shadowy figures of a man and a woman in the front seat, pulled up, and I got inside, in the back seat. The car began to move and somehow I strained to keep it moving, for I suspected it wasn't going anywhere; and then I looked down and there, through the floorboards, grew the grass.

There was no car. I was back on the steps, alone, And I was terrified.

It was years before the phrase "grass growing in the streets" connected itself to the dream. (I knew from the first that it was about being alone.) I think now that the deserted schoolhouse is psychoanalysis (where I am to be "taught" what to be), and that the shadowy man and woman are what psychoanalysis is teaching me; that is, the heterosexual institution. But the schoolhouse is dark and deserted, grass grows in the streets (as was supposed to happen in the 1930s here if that radical, Roosevelt, won), the man and woman are only shadows, and I'm totally alone in a solitary world. Marriage is an illusion. My "teacher" is nonexistent.
It seems to me now the only dream I’ve ever had, aside from (a possible) one in childhood, that’s genuinely schizophrenic, with the changelessness of madness, the absolute desolation, and the complete lack of hope.

But it didn’t happen. Instead I got out.

II. FANTASY

But now we reach problems. Am I a “real” Lesbian?

There is immense social pressure in our culture to imagine a Lesbian as someone who never under any circumstances feels any attraction to any man, in fantasy or otherwise. The popular model of homosexuality is simply the heterosexual institution reversed; since heterosexuality is (supposedly) exclusive, so must homosexuality be. It is this assumption, I think, that lies behind arguments about what a “real Lesbian” is or accusations that so-and-so isn’t “really” a Lesbian. I have been attracted to men; therefore I’m not a Lesbian. I have few (or no) fantasies about women and do have fantasies about men; therefore I’m not a Lesbian. This idea of what a Lesbian is is a wonderful way of preventing anyone from ever becoming one; and when we adopt it, we’re simply doing the culture’s dirty work for it. There are no “real” Lesbians—which is exactly what I heard for years, there are only neurotics, impostors, crazy virgins, and repressed heterosexuals. You aren’t a Lesbian. You can’t be a Lesbian. There aren’t any Lesbians. Real Lesbians have horns.
Since we are outside the culture’s definitions to begin with, most of us are not going to fit the culture’s models of “sex,” not even backwards. There is the Romantic Submission model for women. There is the Consumption Performance model for men. A few years ago Playboy came out with a cover made up of many small squares, each of which contained a picture of part of a naked woman: a single breast, a belly, a leg, two buttocks, &c. There were no faces. I had just come out at this time, and was very upset and confused because I couldn’t respond to this model. Not only wasn’t I relating to women that way; I hated the model itself because I had spent so much time on the other end of it and I knew what that detachable-parts business does to a woman’s sense of self. Did this mean that I was not a Lesbian? Not by Playboy’s standards, certainly. Mind you, I was not therefore a healthy or good woman. I was merely sick, criminal, or crazy. Oddly enough, I don’t think I’ve ever felt guilty about sleeping with women per se; I always felt that my real crime was not sleeping with men. After the first euphoria of discovery (“Joanna, for Heaven’s sake will you lower your voice; do you want the whole restaurant to know?”) what plagued me—and still does—is the nagging feeling that in not sleeping with men I am neglecting a terribly important obligation. I’m sometimes attracted to men I humanly like; when this happens I feel tremendously pressured to do something about it (whether I want to or not). When I don’t act on it, I feel cowardly and selfish, just as I used to feel when I didn’t have orgasms with my husband. Women, after all, don’t count. What happens between women isn’t real. That is, you can’t be beaten up on for more than twenty-five years and not carry scar tissue.

Unfortunately there is something we all do that perpetuates the whole business, and that is treating fantasy as a direct guide to action. Suppression doesn’t only affect behavior; it also affects the meaning and valuation we give
behavior. And it affects fantasy. The popular view is that daydreams or other fantasies are fairly simple substitutes for behavior and that the two are related to each other in a simple one-to-one way, i.e. what you can't act out, you daydream. I don't believe this. For years I did, and was sure that my heterosexual fantasies indicated I was a heterosexual. (My Lesbian fantasies, however, could be dismissed as "wanting to be a man.") I think now that fantasy, like any other language, must be interpreted, that it does not "translate" simply into behavior, and that what is most important about it is the compromise it shows and the underlying subject-matter at work in it. For example, fantasies about "sex" may not be about sex at all, although the energy that feeds them is certainly sexual. I know that in growing up I had fantasies about rescuing Danny Kaye from pirates at the same time that I loved Carol-Ellen. I couldn't find my fantasy of a gentle, beautiful, non-masculine, rescuable man in any of the little boys I knew; there was only dull Bill (He'll do) and the creeps I hated and feared who grabbed me at parties or came up to me in assembly and said, "Baby, your pants are showing." By the age of fifteen I was having two kinds of fantasies: either I was an effeminate, beautiful, passive man being made love to by another man or I was a strong, independent, able, active, handsome woman disguised as a man (sometimes a knight in armor) who rescued another woman from misery or danger in a medieval world I could not picture very well. The first kind of daydream was full of explicit sex and secret contempt; the second was full of emotion and baffled yearning. Whenever it came time to go beyond the first kiss, I was stopped by my own ignorance. There was a third daydream, rarer than the other two, in which I was an independent, able, strong woman disguised as a man and traveling with my lover, an able, strong man who alone knew the secret of my identity. This kind was not satisfying, either
emotionally or sexually, and I think I tried it out of a sense of duty; the one virtue it had was a sort of hearty palship that I liked.

In a sexual situation there are at least two factors operating: who you want the other person to be and who you want to be yourself. If I try to analyze my own past fantasies, I come up with one theme over and over, and that is not who the Other is, but what kind of identity I can have within the confines of the heterosexual institution. What I'll call the Danny Kaye fantasy is William Steig's *Dreams of Glory* with the sexes changed: little boy saves beautiful adult woman from fate worse than something-or-other. (If you look at the early Kaye films, you find that something of the sort is indeed happening, although not nearly to the extent I thought when I was twelve.) I still think that if I had emerged at puberty into a female-dominant culture in which little girls could reasonably dream of rescuing handsome, gentle, sexually responsive (but non-initiating) men from peril, I could have made an uneasy peace with it. I would probably have ended up the way a good many men do within the heterosexual institution: homosexuality for them remains an area of profound uneasiness, although their outward behavior and what they allow themselves to feel matches the norm. However, even the cultural artifacts that turned me on in my youth all took it back in the end, just as Mae West's wooing of Cary Grant in *She Done Him Wrong* is shown up as a fake in the end of the film; he's really a tough cop. In fact, though this model of sexuality is not totally inconceivable and unspeakable, it turns up rarely and is explicitly disallowed. The sixties produced it in grotesque form in Tiny Tim; it took the seventies to produce David Bowie. But the heterosexual institution is wary of this model; it's politically very dangerous. And heterosexual men are trained to avoid it like the plague. Even as a fantasy it disappeared early in my adolescence.
Fantasy Number Two was cued off at age fifteen or thereabouts by something I read, and later on there were movies about Oscar Wilde and so on. (I have never ceased to be amazed at the fact that works about male homosexuality can exist in libraries, quite respectably bound, some even minor classics. They’re few enough but Lesbian works are far fewer.) The one film I hoped would be about Lesbianism (Maedchen in Uniform) wasn’t and disappointed me very much. This fantasy got more and more important as I got older, more depressed, and more outwardly conforming to the heterosexual institution. There were years in my twenties when this was the only way I could daydream about sex at all. I had, by that time, put into this fantasy all the explicit fucking that never got into the others, I’ll give you all the passivity and charm you want . . . if only I’m not a woman.

Number Three (woman/woman) began early; it was modeled on a (totally sexless) parodic little story by Mark Twain about a woman disguised as a man, entitled “A Medieval Romance.” At fifteen I added material from Mademoiselle de Maupin. For close to a decade my knowledge of Lesbianism was limited to these two fictions, one of them a parody (I was too naive to spot this at twelve), and although the emotional tenacity of this fantasy has been awesome, I never put much “sex” into it. I did not, after all, know what women did with each other. And since the only way I could get near a woman was to disguise myself as a man, I had to protect my disguise (otherwise she wouldn’t want me). So it was all impossible. Also, I was uneasy about wanting anybody else to “be the girl,” since I knew what a rotten deal that was; I couldn’t imagine anybody choosing it voluntarily. And how dull she was! But because I was a sort-of-a-man I couldn’t very well love anybody else. Lesbianism modeled on the heterosexual institution didn’t work and I had not the dimmest social clue that any other form of it could exist. And in my heart I
think I would infinitely have preferred the reality of loving a woman to any fantasy; the very fact that it was a fantasy used to make me cry (in the fantasy). So this daydream also dies eventually.

The woman-disguised-as-a-man with a man was a pale one; it was too close to the reality of the heterosexual institution. Male attire is a flimsy protection for the culturally harassed female ego. I used this one rarely.

A fantasy that appeared sporadically through my teens and (like the male homosexual fantasy) got heavy in my twenties was explicit heterosexual masochism. It was physically exciting, erotically dependable, and very upsetting emotionally. I never connected this one to Love Comics and never imagined that it might have social sources; I thought I had invented it, that it meant I was a "real woman" and "really passive," and also that I wanted to be hurt and that I was crazy.

There were two situations I never used in any of my fantasies: a woman loving a man and a man loving a woman. That is, I could never imagine myself in either role of the heterosexual institution. I think now that the heterosexual-masochistic fantasy was a way of sexualizing the situation I was in fact in, and that one of the things it "means" (in translation) is that I was being hurt and I knew that I was being hurt because I was a woman, that it was not sexual at all (as I had been promised) but that I wished to goodness it would be; then at least I would get something out of it. I also suspect that sadomasochism is a way of preventing genuine involvement; either he wasn't emotionally there and present or I wasn't, and anyhow the only thing I can get from all of this is an orgasm.

The one cultural cue I had in abundance was the Dominance/Submission model of the heterosexual institution. The one cultural cue I barely had at all was Lesbianism (there is no cultural vocabulary of words, images, or expec-
tations in this area). Oddly enough, for someone who thought she "wanted to be a man," I never imagined myself a man at all; by what sheer cussedness I managed to resist that cue, I'll never know.

What do people do with their sexuality? Whatever they can, I think. I think fucking can "work" within a wide variety of physical conditions. And the head-trips may not be connected to what one responds to in real life at all. In a fine essay on female sexuality Linda Phelps says that female sexuality is "schizophrenic, relating not to ourselves as self-directed persons, not to our partners as sexual objects of our desire, but to a false world of symbols and fantasy. . . . It is a world whose eroticism is defined in terms of female powerlessness, dependency, and submission. . . . In a male world, female sexuality is from the beginning unable to get a clear picture of itself." She says also that many women "have no sexual fantasies at all" and those who do "often have the same sadomasochistic fantasies that men do."6

Yeah.

Looking back, I think my fantasies were desperate strategies to salvage something of my identity, even at the expense of any realistically possible sexuality. There was, of course, this behavior with women that I wanted but I couldn't talk about that; it was the most taboo of all. (My first incredulous words at thirty-three: "You mean that's real?" Yes, I knew it happened, but . . .) I recognized my Lesbian feelings at age eleven; less than a year later I could no longer even recognize what I was actually doing, let alone what I later wanted to do. The only remotely positive encouragement I got, as well as the only analysis or naming, was the "stage" business. So partly I hung on in a muddled way and partly I gave up; after sixteen I gave up completely. The non-verbal messages were too strong. I think that anyone trying to maintain behavior important to them in the face of massive social pressure can only do so in a crip-
pled and compromised way (especially in isolation), whatever form the crippling takes, whether it's guilt or an inability to fantasize or an inability to act. Or perhaps a constant re-shuffling of the roles prescribed by the heterosexual institution. As I got older things got worse; in my twenties I began to have occasional night dreams in which I was physically a man. I dreamed that a bunch of men was running after a bunch of women with felonious intent. I dreamed that I was being unmasked as "not really a man" and that everyone was laughing at me. As I had progressed from college to the less sheltered graduate school and from there to the not-at-all-sheltered job market my situation became worse and worse. I wasn't a man (let alone a homosexual man). I certainly couldn't love women, I was a woman and women loved men and dull, gentle men weren't "really" men and if I liked them I wasn't "really" a woman (and anyhow I didn't like them except as friends; sex with them was no good). I was out of college now, I had to earn my own living, I had to get married, I had to shape up and have orgasms, this was the real world, dammit.

So I read Genet and Gide (I scorned The Well of Loneliness which I came to much too late anyway) and believed that art and life were totally separate. By then I really did want to be a man (for one thing, men didn't have such horrible lives, or so the heterosexual institution informed me). I was married. I was frigid. I couldn't earn my own living. I wasn't sure I was a writer. Psychoanalysis seemed only to prove more and more that the impossibility of my ever being a "real" woman was my own fault. I was hopelessly crazy and a failure at everything. My analyst, in the kindest possible way, pointed out to me that my endless infatuations with inaccessible men were not realistic; I tried to tell him that for me nothing was realistic. My maneuvers for retaining some shred of autonomy within the iron-and-concrete prison of the heterosexual institution were getting
desperate; they now involved wholesale transformations of identity or the direct translation of my real situation into "masochism," which terrified and disgusted me. (I only brought myself to write about these fantasies many years later, by which time they had lost much of their glamor.) I knew that I did not really want to sleep with men. But that was sick. I did want to sleep with men—but only in my head and only under very specialized circumstances. That was sick. In short I had—for close to twenty-five years—no clear sexual identity at all, no confidence in my own bodily experience, and no pleasure in lovemaking with any real person. I had to step out of the heterosexual institution before I could put myself back together and begin to recover my own bodily and emotional experience. When I did, it was only because the women's movement had thoroughly discredited the very idea of "real" women, thus enabling me to become a whole person who could then pay some attention to the gay liberation movement. (My most vivid feeling after my first Lesbian experience: that my body was well-put-together, graceful, healthy, fine-feeling, and above all, female—a thought that made me laugh until I cried.) Whenever people talk about the difference between politics and personal life, I'm dumbfounded. Not only were these "political" movements intensely "personal" in their effect on me; I can't imagine a "political" stance that doesn't grow out of "personal" experience. On my own I would never have made it. I can still remember—and the institutional cruelty behind the incident still staggers me—telling my woman-disguised-as-man-with-man fantasy to my psychoanalyst, and this dreary piece of compromise (which did not, in fact, work erotically at all) met with his entire approval; he thought it was a real step forward that I should imagine myself to be a "real" woman being made love to by a "real" man. Then he said, smiling:

"But why do you have to be disguised as a man?"
There’s a lot I haven’t put in this story. For example, the years of limbo that followed my first Lesbian affair (“What do I do now?”), the overwhelming doubts that it had happened, which attacked me when I had to live an isolated life again in a world in which there exists absolutely no public sign that such things happen, or the self-hatred and persisting taboos (“Women are ugly” “Vaginas are slimy and strong and have horrible little teeth”) or the terror of telling anyone.

As I said, by the time I read The Well of Loneliness I had learned that the whole business was absurd and impossible. (The books’ gender roles also put me off.) I never dared buy one of those sleazy paperbacks I saw in drugstores, although I wanted them desperately. I was terrified to let the cashier see them. (Mind you, this didn’t mean I was a Lesbian. It only meant that if I read all of the arousing scenes I glimpsed in them, I might become so aroused that I might go to a bar and do something Lesbian, which would be awful, because I wasn’t one.) I suppose not reading about all those car crashes and suicides was a mild sort of plus, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to reach one’s thirties without any cultural imagery for one of the most important parts of one’s identity and one’s life. So I’ve made some up. I hope that in filling the fantasy gap for myself, I’ve helped fill it for others, too.

I would like to thank various literary women for existing. Some of them know me and some do not. This is not an exhaustive list. Among them are: June Arnold, Sally Gearhart, Barbara Grier, Susan Griffin, Marilyn Hacker, Joan Larkin, Audre Lorde, Jill Johnston, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, and too many more to put down here.
Postscribbles

1. Overheard at a gay conference, Lesbian to gay man, nearby a woman minister in “minister suit” trying not to smile: “We’re all in drag.”

2. A common way to cloak one’s hatred of and dismissal of an issue is to snot it, i.e., the outraged ignorance of the reviews of Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time and the more sophisticated (and more hateful) reviews of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born.

3. The paralysis of the “open secret,” everyone reassured about their generosity and your safety . . . except you. Or the (even worse) open secret which everybody knows except you, a closet so vanishingly small that it’s collapsed into a one-dimensional point and extruded itself (possibly) into some other universe, where it may be of use but not in this one. A well-meaning woman friend, upon learning that I was a Lesbian, “That’s all right. It’s nobody’s business but yours.”

4. Some white male reviewer in the New York Times speaking slightlyingly of the irredentism of minority groups in our time. The Boys never cease to amaze me.

5. That isn’t an issue.
That isn’t an issue any more.
That isn’t really an issue any more.
Therefore why do you keep bringing it up?
You keep bringing it up because you are crazy.
You keep bringing it up because you are destructive.
You keep bringing it up because you want to be annoying.
You keep bringing it up because you are greedy and selfish.
You keep bringing it up because you are full of hate.
You keep bringing it up because you want to flaunt yourself.
You keep bringing it up because you deliberately want to separate yourself from the rest of the community.
How do you expect me to support a person as crazy/destructive/annoying/selfish/hateful/ flaunting/separatist as you are?
I really cannot support someone as bad as that.
Especially since there is no really important issue involved.

6. Vaginas do not have sharp little teeth! Pass it on.

NOTES

1. And only if we had made love.
2. Up to about a year ago.
3. I don’t mean that such men are “really” homosexual. That’s going back to the model of the heterosexual institution again. They’ve suppressed a good deal of themselves, although what is allowed to exist isn’t necessarily false.
4. I have only recently become aware of the extent of my own woman-hating and my own valuing of male bodies as more important, valuable, strong and hence “beautiful” than female bodies. Even a Lesbian wouldn’t want an (ugh) woman! Even if she loved her. Feelings of inferiority climb into bed with you.
5. I’m talking of “masochism” as most women I know understand it: i.e. humiliation, shame, embarrassment, impersonality, emotional misery. Physical pain was not part of it; oddly enough, physical pain is what most men I know assume to be “masochism.”
6. “Female Sexual Alienation” by Linda Phelps, reprinted in The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from "The Ladder," eds. Grier and Reid, Diana Press, Baltimore, MD 1976, pp. 161-170. Ms. Phelps does not address herself exclusively to gay women. I think in this area she’s probably right not to, as I suspect the mechanisms are the same for both, though one would suffer more symbolic distortion and the other more total obliteration.

7. Italian radicalism of the later 19th century, calling for a unification of all the Italian-speaking peoples, i.e., nationalism: by extension, fighting for the rights of a group which perceives itself to have common interests. How wicked.
Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement

A strong woman is a woman in whose head a voice is repeating, I told you so, ugly, bad girl, bitch, nag, shrill, witch, ballbuster, nobody will ever love you back, why aren't you feminine, why aren't you soft, why aren't you quiet, why aren't you dead?

—Marge Piercy, "For Strong Women," from The Moon Is Always Female*

Really good women, really "nice" women, really sisterly women, are dead women.

Well, no. Nobody literally expects millions of us to drop down ker-flop clutching flowers to our bosoms like Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolat, and yet I wonder. Women are supposed to make other people feel good, to fill others' needs without having any of our own—this is the great Feminine Imperative. Such self-suppression amounts to the death of the self. Why demand such an impossibility?

All oppressed people must be controlled. Since open force and economic coercion are practical only part of the time, ideology—that is, internalized oppression, the voice in the head—is brought in to fill the gap. When people discover their own power, governments tremble. Therefore, in addition to all the other things that are done to control people, their own strength must be made taboo to them. Vast numbers of men can be allowed to experience some power as long as they expend their power against other men and against women—a desirable state of affairs since it keeps men (and men and women) from cooperating, which would be a grave menace to the powers that be. Therefore the Masculine Imperative is less severe than the Feminine one.

The Masculine Imperative means that men avoid the threat of failure, inadequacy, and powerlessness—omnipresent in a society built on competition and private property—by existing against others.

But the Feminine Imperative allows of no self-help at all. We exist for others.

But women are also terrified by female strength, women judge success in women to be the worst sin, women force women to be "unselfish," women would rather be dead than strong, rather helpless than happy.

Feminist women, too.

If you've been forbidden the use of your own power for your own self, you can give up your power or you can give up your self. If you're effective, you must be so for others but never for yourself (that would be "selfish"). If you're allowed to feel and express needs, you must be powerless to do anything about them and can only wait for someone else—a man, an institution, a strong woman—to do it for you.

That is, you can be either a Magic Momma or a Trembling Sister.

Magic Mommas are rare and Trembling Sisters are com-
mon; the taboo is so strong that it’s safer to be totally ineffective, or as near to it as is humanly possible. Moreover, election to the status of Magic Momma requires some real, visible achievement, which, in a male-dominated society, is rare. Nonetheless, every feminist group contains at least one Magic Momma; success being entirely relative, somebody can always be elevated to MM status. (If canny group members, aware of this possibility, refuse to do, say, or achieve anything, they can be chosen for past achievement, or smaller and smaller differences in behavior can be seized on as evidence of Magic Momma-hood.) Since we are all struggling with the Feminine Imperative, one of the ways achieving women combat the guilt of success is by agreeing to be Magic Mommas.

- MM's give to others—eternally.
- MM's are totally unselfish.
- MM's have infinite time and energy.
- MM's love all other women, always.
- MM's never get angry at other women.
- MM's don't sleep.
- MM's never get sick.

If MM's don't fulfill the above conditions, they feel horribly, horribly guilty.

- MM's know that they can never do enough.

Like the Victorian mother, the Magic Momma pays for her effectiveness by renouncing her own needs. But these don't go away. The MM feels guilt over her achievements, guilt over not doing more (in fact, this is the common female guilt over not doing everything for everyone), and the steadily mounting rage of deprivation, as well as the added rage caused by having to feel guilty all the time.

Meanwhile the Trembling Sister has plenty to be enraged about too. Having avoided the guilt of being effective, she's allowed to feel and express her own needs, but she pays for these “advantages” by an enforced helplessness which re-
quires that somebody fill her needs for her, since she's not allowed to do so herself.

The trouble is that nobody can.

No matter how much being taken care of the TS manages to wrangle out of others, it is never enough. For being taken care of is exactly what she does not need. It reinforces her helplessness, while what she really needs is access to her own effectiveness—and that is something no one can give to another person.

The Trembling Sister, insisting on being given what she doesn't need and can't use, becomes more and more deprived, and more and more enraged. The Magic Momma, enraged at her enforced guilt and similar enforced deprivation, sooner or later fails to meet the Trembling Sister's needs. She may become ill or reveal some human flaw. She may withdraw, or criticize, or get angry. If MM-hood has been bestowed on her without her knowledge and consent, she may not know what's expected of her and may "sin" in ignorance.

The Trembling Sister can tolerate achievement in women only when such achievement is "unselfish"—i.e., accompanied by visible giving to everyone else and divested of visible satisfaction—and remember, it's precisely her own effectiveness that she's suppressing. She now has the unbearably enraged experience of being (apparently) abandoned by someone who is (apparently) enjoying the very sort of effectiveness she has made inaccessible to herself. The Magic Momma, already angry from years of self-deprivation which have turned out to be useless (since nothing she does ever satisfies either the TS or her own conscience) has the unbearably enraged experience of ingratitude and complaint from someone for whom she has worked hard and "sacrificed everything."

Worse, neither can justify her rage, since our (usually false) social assumption that people cause their own failures
happens, in both their cases, to be perfectly true. At the same time both feel their rage to be justified, since—according to the Feminine Imperative—the MM is right to deprive herself and the TS right to be helpless.

Put the MM and the TS together and you get the conventional female role.

You also get trashing.

Trashing in the feminist movement has always proceeded from “below” “upwards,” directed by the Trembling Sister (that is, those who’ve adopted the TS position) at the self-elected (or merely supposed) MM. The hidden agenda of trashing is to remain helpless and to fail, whatever the ostensibly motivation. The payoff is to Be Good (though miserable). The TS/MM scenario is predicated on the unrealistic ascription of enormous amounts of power to one side and the even more unrealistic ascription of none at all to the other. It assumes that hurting another woman’s feelings is the worst thing—the very worst thing—the most unutterably awful thing—that a woman can do. In a world where women and men are starved, shot, beaten, bombed, and raped, the above assumption takes some doing, but since the MM/TS script requires it, it gets made. (The script also assumes that the MM has no feelings, or if she does, hurting them is a meritorious act.)

MMs do less harm; they can work themselves to death or—paralyzed with guilt—do nothing. Or they can encourage other MMs’ guilt or fail to discourage TS’s expectations of MMs. But discouraging a TS’s expectations of an MM is an enterprise fraught with risk, as many feminists know to their cost.

What to do?

Both parties need the confidence that self-love and self-assertiveness are not evil. The MM needs to learn that feelings of guilt are not objective political obligations; the TS needs to learn that feeling intensely conflicted about
power has nothing to do with objective helplessness. The MM needs to be helped. The TS needs not to be helped.

No one originally takes either position of her own free will. The Feminine Imperative is forced on all of us. But in adulthood, and certainly within a feminist community, a woman who remains in either position is her own prisoner. The women’s community as a mystically loving band of emotional weaklings who make up to each other by our kindness and sweetness for the harshness we have to endure in the outside world is a description that exactly characterizes the female middle-class sub-culture as it’s existed in patriarchy for centuries—without changing a thing. This is not a revolutionary movement but a ghetto in which anyone seen as having achievement, money, or power is cast as a Magic Momma, whose function is to make up to everyone else for the world’s deprivation and their terror of effectiveness. This is impossible. So the requirement becomes to make others feel good all the time, an especially seductive goal in times of political reaction when activity directed outward at the (seemingly) monolithic social structure is not only frustrating but frighteningly dangerous. So honesty goes by the board, hurt feelings are put at a premium, general fear and paralysis set in, and one by one any woman who oversteps the increasingly circumscribed area of what’s permissible is trashed. Eventually, after the demons of success and effectiveness have been banished, and all the female villains who made everyone else feel miserable have left or been silenced, what happens?

The group disintegrates.

The Feminine Imperative has been faithfully served. The enemy has been driven from the ranks. Feminism has been destroyed.

Some revolutionary proposals:
Self-sacrifice is vile.
Martyrdom cults (like that surrounding Sylvia Plath), which link failure, death, and female approval, are abominable.

Anyone who ascribes enormous success, money, or power to any woman—certainly any feminist—is daydreaming.

"Uncritical support" is a contradiction in terms.

There is a crucial distinction between the personal and the political. The former leads to the latter but not automatically or without hard work.

Women are not beginners at art or politics; we need to recover our forerunners, not remain in a socially and self-imposed infancy.

Public, political activity is crucial for a political movement.

Demands for the right "tone" in women's interactions are like those statements made to us by men about our tone, i.e., "I would've listened to you women if only you'd been ladylike."

Political theory is crucial for a political movement. I favor the incorporation of class analysis into feminism (not vice-versa) but any way of dealing with political relations between male groups will do. Unless (like J. Edgar Hoover about Communism) you think all we need to know about contemporary patriarchy is that we're agin it.

What makes the MM/TS scenario so stubborn is the hidden insistence that a woman cannot, must not, be allowed to use her power on her own behalf. Our society runs on self-aggrandizement for men and self-abasement for women; talk of self-love terrifies men (for whom it means admitting interdependence and emotionality) while women can only expect that I'm recommending brutality and callousness.

One remedy would be to remember Cicely Tyson's TV portrayal of Harriet Tubman.* Biographers are always sur-

* A Woman Called Moses
prised when women like Tubman "sacrifice" their personal lives (or so the biographers assume) for a "cause." That is, they interpret such women's actions in terms of the Feminine Imperative. But to be General Moses was no Victorian self-sacrifice, any more than Cicely Tyson (in my opinion, the best living performer in the theatre, uncontrollable in a conventionally superficial role) sacrificed something she really wanted to do in order to do her duty by playing Harriet Tubman. When Harriet Tubman said that God wanted her to lead her people to freedom, she was not submitting her will to another's but arrogating to herself the authenticity and truth of her God, not losing herself but uniting herself with her own transpersonal dimension. Viewers who saw Tyson tuck her chin down in maidenly shyness and whisper, "Momma and Daddy, the last thing I want to do is cause you to worry,"—and then burst forth in fire, "But GOD—" knows that they have not seen anything remotely like self-sacrifice, either on the character's part or the actress's. An action may be hard, unpleasant, dangerous, the salvation of others—and heroically self-creating.

Nor is there anything wrong with that unless you believe that human selves—especially female selves—are intrinsically bad, or that we are a lousy species.

To insist that women challenge their own fear of effectiveness and their own guilt for behaving effectively, to insist that we both behave honestly and responsibly and risk hurting others' feelings (which is hardly the worst thing in the world) is emphatically to disobey the Feminine Imperative. It's selfish. It isn't sisterly. It isn't "nice."

But it is, I'm beginning to suspect, the feminist act.

I haven't, needless to say, written the above out of pure, altruistic concern for the women's community. And I can't envision any of it affecting those women so alienated from their own power that they feel desperately that they must have a Magic Momma (somewhere, somehow) at all costs,
even the cost of being miserably helpless. But there are many women who don’t feel helpless themselves, yet feel guiltily (a) that everyone else must be, and (b) they don’t want to risk the possibility that these totally helpless and vulnerable people may create a very nasty scene. (Quite a contradiction, that!) I also violently resent being first elevated to mythological status and then slammed for it. And the insistence on this person’s hurt feelings and that one’s tremendous vulnerability and the exquisite fragility of everyone (which doesn’t prevent some of them kicking up a very nasty fuss when they don’t get what they want). People dealing with external oppression don’t act this way. (For one thing, they don’t have time.) The MM/TS syndrome is a sign of internalized oppression and a form of addiction; that is, since it reinforces the Feminine Imperative, the more you get, the less you have and the more you need. The scenario strikes me as class-linked; I suspect that those oppressed in a directly economic way or by open force don’t do this nearly as much—or at least that it doesn’t reach the same pitch of feverishness. However, it may be that the kind of services women qua women provide (affection, admiration, R&R, personal service) require that women be controlled by ideology, since these services must be provided voluntarily at least to some degree.

I think that the unexpressed, unformulated, and very bitter belief that sexism is true is also at work here, that is, the idea that women can’t do this or that. It’s this belief that causes the MM’s passionately angry disappointment when Unknown Woman A’s work proves to be terrible, and the TS’s conviction that the only way most women can ever have the pleasures of public success is for the few of us who have (in some magically mysterious way) gained access to the public world of culture and action to tell lies about the achievements of the others. Such a conviction adds to the pain of dispraise (which everybody of course feels) and rage
at its seeming arbitrariness. Why is Famous Woman B saying such things about Unknown Woman A’s work when A’s only hope is for B to be nice to her? Explanations like “elitism,” “male identification,” selling out, or intoxication with fame, explain nothing; you might as well say Original Sin and be done with it. B is simply being mean, a dreadful act when all access to success is (supposedly) in her all-powerful hands.

There is also the problem of ignorance. Those without much access to the public world are unlikely to have had contact with the real hatchet-women of the patriarchy, or real Queen Bees, or know the conditions under which Famous Woman B actually has to work.

For example, feminists have no control over the covers trade publishers put on their books. Sometimes even the editors don’t. Authorial control over the very text of a science fiction novel is not standard in the trade and must be negotiated. It is often resented; I once lost a magazine sale by insisting that a story of mine stay as written. (How many book sales I or others may have lost by getting a reputation for being “difficult” I don’t know.) Even when negotiated, an author’s control over the text amounts only to veto power over the editor’s or publisher’s changes, “not to be unreasonably refused” (you figure that one out). Good editors don’t change good authors’ mss. — but “good editors” means a minority of those in the field.

Did you know that the hardcover publisher of a book gets half of all the author’s paperback income for ever and ever?

That one of the most famous American feminists has been on welfare and had to have money raised by others to pay her hospital bill when she fell ill?

That another, internationally known, lives on less than $9,000 a year, out of necessity? By farming?

That you can publish six books in twelve years, sell 100,000 of some of them, and make less than $2,500 a year,
including money from book reviews, other non-fiction, short-story sales, and foreign sales?

I'm not complaining, but trying to demolish the illusion of the MM's enormous power and success.

There is simply no such thing. What does exist is the American—or simply modern—illusion that "celebrities" (in however tiny a community) have real, pleasure-filled lives, and the rest of us have—what, unreal ones?—and the insistence on failure and dependency that underlies such attributions of power.

To understand that no one has or can have your power, that it remains in you no matter how forbidden you feel it to be, means defying the patriarchal taboo and that's very hard. It means claiming one's own limited but real power and abandoning one's inflated notion of other women's power. It means engaging in a direct public confrontation with the patriarchy as embodied in men and men's institutions, not concentrating on its symbolic presence in other members of the women's community.

To risk failure is bad enough. To risk success is even worse. After all, women have been burnt alive for claiming a power which was, paradoxically, not enough to save them. It's safer to be weak, safer to have someone else be strong for you and be punished for it in your place.

I believe that trashing, far from being the result of simple envy, arises from a profound ambivalence towards power. The intensity of feeling, the violent inculcation of guilt, the extreme contrast of omnipotence and powerlessness, the lack of substantive complaint, * the anger, the absolute lack

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*Cruel," "unfair," "unkind," "After I worked so hard," not "gentle" or "positive," are typical phrases (I'm skimming back issues of feminist periodicals). The claim that someone has stopped writing or publishing as a catastrophic result also crops up. Years ago a very young (junior-high-school age) woman asked me to send her copies of all my work and the answers to three pages of questions about it for a paper her teacher had suggested; I wrote her, explaining that writers hadn't the time to fulfill such requests and referred her to her teacher, who ought to be teaching her how to do research. Her older sister then wrote me, stating that she was going to expose me in Ms., that because of my bad behavior her sister, who had hoped to be a writer, had given up all such ambitions.
of impersonality or a sense of public activity, the utter demandingness—all these echo a mother-daughter relationship in which the terrible, hidden truth is not that our mothers are strong, but that they are very weak. The complaint, "You are so strong and I am so helpless" hides the far worse one, "I am strong enough that my strength will get me into terrible trouble, and you are too weak to protect me if that happens."

For all oppressed people strength and success are double-edged: heartbreakingly desirable and very dangerous. But to "risk winning" (Phyllis Chesler's phrase from Women and Madness, a book to which I owe many of the ideas in this piece) is the only way out of oppression.

"Successful" feminists aren't immune to this terror of power; all the women I know feel it. We take the risk anyway. That's the only secret, not some fantastic, illusory power-fame-and-glory that some women have and others don't. I recently heard a conversation between two Lesbians, one of whom was living openly as such and one of whom was afraid to leave her marriage. The married one said, "I can't leave my husband because I'm not brave, like you." To which the other (who had left her husband only two years before) said, "Don't give me that. I was just as scared as you when I left my marriage, but I did it anyway. That's what made me brave."

The MM/TS polarity is illusory. Both are positions in the same belief system. Both are engaged in ritually sacrificing the possibility of a woman's being effective on her own behalf, not needy and ineffective, not effective and altruistic, but effective for herself.

It's selfish, vicious, and nasty, and will cause everyone within a thousand miles to faint flat.

But it beats being dead.
Being Against Pornography

Maybe some women can tell the difference between pornography and erotica at a single glance.

I can’t.

Three or four years ago I would have agreed 100% with the anti-pornography activists, but since then I’ve been through a long process of examining my own impulses, talking to other women, giving the subject as much thought and analysis as I can, and trying as much as possible to relate all this information to my personal history—which is by no means a painless one, truly.

In short, I’ve been consciousness-raising (with other women) not simply saying “We know what hurts us” which—when applied to male-oriented pornography—means, “This is my unexplored, unanalyzed reaction to your fantasies.”

And what I found was rather unsettling.
In the fifties, when I was an adolescent, my young, female, artist-intellectual friends and I associated (as one might expect) with young, male, artist-intellectuals. They were, without exception, on the side of beauty, freedom, and unconventionality (we knew this because they told us so) and they often lectured us that we, too, should be the same—which meant putting out for them. Remember, this was long before abortion was safe and legal.* It was also still a time in which men could pull sex-rank on women merely by “talking dirty,” or mentioning sex without the obligatory bow to “romance” or indicating that they were sexually experienced. Because they were “free” and we were not, because nobody validated our (perfectly correct) perceptions that sex, even without pregnancy, was far more dangerous for us, socially and psychologically, than it was for them, we had no rebuttal for this rather nasty kind of egotism. We could say that we didn’t like that sort of talk—but to act “prudish” or “ladylike” was to accept the very social values that we ourselves were trying so hard to escape. We couldn’t be “feminine” and also human (that is, free artist-intellectuals, which is what we wanted so very much to be) but if we dared to throw away the protection (and suffocation) of the double standard, we faced the obligation (which nobody doubted) of being sexually “free” since female sexual vulnerability was the very reason (so we were told) women were inferior to men and couldn’t be artists.

The mass media said exactly the same thing—the choice was either marriage (which was normal) or celibacy (which showed that you were crazy) or “free” sexuality—which not only showed you were crazy but also killed you, probably via abortion.

That was why no woman had ever been a great artist, because she could not be “free” and therefore could not write about the really important subjects, which were (of
course) male camaraderie, fist fights, bullfighting—and "free" sexuality.

Today this looks like a pretty transparent con job (marry and be subhuman, stay celibate and go mad, be promiscuous and die of abortion) but in the fifties it was backed up by everything we knew. The choice was either to admit that we were inferior beings (which was intolerable) or to take the most appalling risks to prove that we could play the male games in the male way (likewise).

Lesbianism as a way out? But that was even more out of the question. Lesbianism was an abnormality even more ghastly and inevitably punished than abortion.

Nonetheless there was still one choice left. Since at least the 19th century women in our position had been trading off sexuality for humanity. (I suspect such a bargain was and still is very widespread.) And that is just what we did.

I remember very vividly being caught between two anxieties: that I was doing sex "wrong" (everyone else knew how and I didn't) and that sex itself was somehow "wrong," that is, unworkable.

Naturally I did my best to stick with the latter idea. I was (and my friends were) much more like the suburban housewives we felt so superior to than any of us knew. All of us ended up in the one position that could guard us against the feeling that our sexuality (which usually didn't "work", see the Kinsey report) was our inferiority. On the contrary, it was just because we were incapable of impersonal or casual sex that we were superior to men and our superiority was moral.

This is the Harlequin Romance solution. Casual sex is morally defective; those who have sex only as one aspect of a Great Love are morally superior to those who do not. Sex is love. Proper, good, female sex transcends the physical and is thereby personal and sacred; impersonal, appetitive sex is male and a sign of depravity.
Sound familiar?

It’s this belief that enables good Fundamentalist Christian ladies to condemn homosexuality and recreational sex and pornography and prostitution and S & M as identical sins and to believe that people corrupt enough to indulge in any one of them are capable of all vileness and baseness. It’s this belief that enabled a Lesbian reader of the *Gay Community News* to condemn S & M as insulting to women forced into prostitution and women experiencing genital mutilation, then to somehow identify all three as identical evils, and to end her letter, “If there is a decent dyke left in this world, contact us!”\(^2\) I’ve read a Lesbian review of *The Joy Of Lesbian Sex* which said (in obvious upset) that most of us don’t have such a “cold attitude” to our bodies.\(^3\) I met a Phyllis Schafly-esque Iron-Maiden-of-the-Christian-Right in the women’s conference at Boulder, Colorado who also believed that sex for sex’s sake was evil. And we know that N.O.W. has disdainfully detached itself from issues like boy-love and S & M, while accepting homosexuality as a political issue, even though the same principle of choice is involved in all three.

Bitterness and envy lie behind this belief, an experience of intolerable coercion, and the profound conviction, at some level, that we really are inferior to men and that things will never be otherwise.

What does all of this have to do with the movement against pornography?

Well, when *Take Back The Night*\(^4\) appeared in our local bookstore, I bought it eagerly and took it home with great pleasure. But after several readings, I found myself (like Deirdre English in her essay in *Mother Jones*)\(^5\) not so much in disagreement with it as profoundly uneasy. Yes, pornography is a feminist issue, I guess. Yes, there’s plenty of violence against women. Yes, women are sexually exploited.

But—
If erotica was different from porn, why didn’t the writers give examples of erotica that got *them* excited? (They don’t.)

If (as some said) they were attacking only violence and not sex *per se*, why on earth weren’t they attacking TV cop shows and Hollywood movies like *Apocalypse Now*? Why, if they were attacking violence, did the vast majority of titles (both essays and books) say “pornography”?6

Why did some of those who wanted to ban pornography make light of the civil rights arguments? Why did some of them scoff at the idea that such a ban could possibly be turned against feminist material?7 (The historical evidence is all the other way.)

Why did those who only wanted pornography kept out of sight still speak of it as extremely dangerous?8 (If it’s that bad, merely putting it under the counter is a mighty feeble remedy.)

Why were we perpetually told that this, that, or the other was *on the rise* when there was no evidence whatsoever of a rise and even some evidence against? Laura Lederer’s introduction to *Take Back The Night* mentions “increasing amounts of pornography” in the same paragraph that she says that violence against women “has been assumed for so long.”9 (Italics mine.) Florence Rush is quoted as saying that the ideal of femininity “is fast becoming the infantilized woman” (italics mine) without any mention of the nineteenth century’s ideal baby-woman. Then she herself speaks of 19th century child prostitution.10 Helen Longino speaks of the “growing acceptance of non-human nouns . . . to refer to women” (italics mine) with such snappy modernisms as “doll” and “skirt.” She also lists “fuck” under the rubric of “verbs of harm.”11 Robin Morgan speaks of the “recent and horrifying rise in the rate of marital violence” (italics mine) giving as her source Del Martin’s *Battered Wives*, which cites an increase for one city, Boston (for which the
figures are incomplete) and does not compare year with year for any other place.\textsuperscript{12}

It’s one thing to point out the significance of scientific and social neglect of a topic. It’s quite another to make your figures up. In fact, considering the social position of women in the U.S. and Europe fifty or one hundred or in Europe five hundred years ago and considering the laws about wife-battering that are actually on the books for those eras, it’s quite impossible that the rate should have gone up, or even (perhaps) stayed the same. Wife-battering, now a hidden and neglected crime, was once open, legal, and openly encouraged.

Why does nobody know (and most don’t seem to care) who uses pornography and what kinds of pornography—are there divisions by class, age, race, income, different media, etc.?

Why have not the articles critical of the anti-pornography activists appeared in the feminist media? Of course I may have missed some, but so far I have found such material only in other publications (John D’Emilio in \textit{Christopher Street},\textsuperscript{13} Deirdre English in \textit{Mother Jones},\textsuperscript{14} Pat Califia in \textit{The Advocate}\textsuperscript{15} and \textit{Co-evolution Quarterly}.\textsuperscript{16})

Why does Susan Griffin give us, as a feminist ideal of sexuality, the great love of (hold on to your hats) Tristan and Isult?\textsuperscript{*} (Doesn’t anyone remember the early feminist movement’s condemnation of romantic love?) Two other positive statements are by Sanford and Donovan, in \textit{Family Circle}, that “real sex is the most personal and loving of expressions,”\textsuperscript{17} and Laura Lederer quotes from Elizabeth Cady Stanton (in a letter to Susan B. Anthony in 1853), “Man in his lust has regulated long enough the whole question of sexual intercourse. Now let the mother of mankind, whose perogative it is to set bounds to his indulgence, rise up and give this whole matter a thorough, fearless examina-

\textsuperscript{*} Who die for love, remember the liebestod?
tion.” (Italics added. Those last two would certainly rejoice the Moral Majority!)

Why is there so little political and economic analysis in this material and so much horrified indignation? Susan Grif-fin’s attempt at analysis is the most subtle and complex of all, and she ends up telling us that the cause of pornography is “the pornographic mind” (italics mine)—a constant throughout history though located in nobody’s head in particular, which creates pornography as a way to cope with its “schizoid split” which is, as far as I can tell, uncaused or merely the human condition. All these phenomena (the schizoid split, the pornographic mind, and pornography) occur in an abstract realm where economics, population pressure, technology, ecology, even history, don’t exist. Kathleen Barry (in Female Sexual Slavery) attempts no feminist analysis at all—which means that the reader’s experience of atrocity after atrocity is unrelieved by any notion of what to do to change things or any idea of what causes such Godawful events other than male original sin.

Women Against Pornography and Violence in the Media sent a slide lecturer to Seattle a few years ago. Her talk made me uneasy, since her examples of pornography were mostly non-violent, some of them dubious as pornography at all, and when questioned she said that non-violent pornography degraded women because it showed us as sexual objects. Does no one remember the early ’70s objection against women being shown as sex objects because that was all we were allowed to be?

Why is there so little talk about sex and so little knowledge? Are men (or women) “imprinted” at certain periods in their lives with certain sexual cues, to which they respond thereafter? Is S & M identical with real cruelty or is it something totally different? (I vote for the latter.) I hear that in S & M most men (like most women) want to be the “bottom,” not the top; what does this do to theories
that S & M is identical with violence?

Why does nobody discuss female pornography? Haven’t they noticed *Sweet Savage Yam* in the supermarket alongside the vegetable bin? On the other side is *Tremulous Love* and next to that is *He Busted Her Bodice*, all three just as self-serving and just as ritualized and the 1st and 3rd just as explicit as any male masturbatory fantasy.

Why does nobody pair an anti-pornography stance with an insistence that children have sexual rights, including the right to technical know-how, the right to privacy, and the right to public encouragement of whatever they want to do, whether hetero, homo, solo, or non? And by children I mean not only adolescents but children of nine and six and three?

Why does nobody investigate the history of pornography? So much depends on the printing press and the isolation of middle-class people, especially women, in that other new invention, The Home. Perhaps what we’re seeing now is a “democratization” of pornography; what used to be available in Europe only to well-to-do men (and before that, the male aristocracy) is now available to working-class men—and women, only our pornography is a smaller business and less bold—just like everything else meant for women only!

Why the anti-pornography movement? Why *just now*?

Put the socialization I described earlier (which has been around for some time) together with the political frustration of the last few years, the stagnation of feminist theory (among middle-class white women, at least), a retreat into the “decency issues” which the whole community must at least pretend to honor, and you will end up with something very like what we have now.

I think there are parallels that can be drawn between today’s anti-pornography movement and the 19th century Temperance movement. Men did drink up their wages and
beat and starve their wives. By pinpointing Demon Rum as the central issue, reformers could avoid the real (and dangerous) ones like women's position in marriage and women's lack of economic autonomy, thus keeping a crusader's self-respect while avoiding a radical's punishment. (The members of the W.C.T.U. may have been laughed at, but it was the members of the W.S.P.U. who were jailed and force-fed.) The liquor interests fought female suffrage in the belief that women would vote the country dry. They were right, too: Prohibition was voted in—and it did nothing except make bootleggers' fortunes!

Something of the same sort is happening now. As a friend of mine says, a lot of women are being driven from feminism to femininism, which means *If I can't have it, you can't have it* and *At least don't rub my nose in it.*

And yet there's really something wrong with using pornography, isn't there? Something tacky, something cheap, something thoughtless, egotistical, and harmful?

No.

Now I'm going to bed. There's a vampire film on TV that's full of violence, obvious sadism, tons of gore, and the most stereotyped gender roles imaginable. In fact, the whole business is very S & M and enough to turn a feminist's stomach.

Not mine.

As you read this I'll be passive and helpless and vaguely yearning, leaning out of a turret window in my sexy, busty, low-cut peignor, brushing my long, lovely, feminine hair and waiting for Him.

Guess why!
1. Marge Piercy's *Braided Lives* (New York: Summit), 1982, describes such a milieu very well.


14. See footnote 5.


News From
The Front

Last Tuesday I was in my local hardware store, pricing chickenwire to cover my petunias. The typewriter at our local women's center had acquired the habit of being stolen—I was trying to do something about this too—and I must have seemed too enthusiastic about the nuts, bolts, and chains, for a young woman in blue jeans and T-shirt gave me the most disapproving look I've ever received in my life, and I could not imagine why until I came home to find the June issue of off our backs on my doorstep and a pile of other publications, all about what I will call (to be equally unfair to both sides) the Great PP Controversy or the "Puritans" vs. the "Perverts."

I must admit that my first reaction was to be sympathetic to the Perverts. Particularly irritating was the Puritans' apparent lack of theory—but as I read on it occurred to me that the Puritan side was indeed operating on a theory,
whether explicit (as quoted below) or implicit. Here is Dorchen Leidholt on one part of it: "the belief that the root of women's oppression is located in personal, sexual relationships, which become the model for oppression in every area of society . . . 'The personal is political.'

And here is another, in the same essay: "... pornography is its [the patriarchy's] primary agent of socialization."1 I think most feminists occupying the Puritan position would find the above formulation too narrow, so let's restate it to read that culture—in neither the broad, anthropological sense of everything that goes on in a society or the narrow use to identify "high" culture (as opposed to popular culture and the mass media)—is the primary cause of sexism along with personal, sexual relationships. To these I think we must add a third idea, that sexual behavior and sexual preferences are the core of the human personality—or, at the very least, a faithful barometer of it, so that sexuality is a fundamental shaper and predictor of personality.

I don't think it's unfair to see these ideas as central to the PP controversy, again: that women's subjection is caused by personal relations and culture (in the sense of the mass media, advertising, fiction, art, etc.) and that sexuality is crucial to the core of human personality.

If the above is so, then corruptions of sexuality are, quite simply, horrendous, and the fact that your supposedly feminist neighbor is pouring hot wax on her lover in the service of sexual arousal is something so dreadful, so betraying, so incomprehensible, that there is almost no limit to the horror with which you ought to react.

First, the theory that sexuality is a profound determiner of the dynamics of the human personality is, of course, Freud's. He did not supply the idea in its modern form, however; for one thing, he believed that perversion and neurosis were mutually exclusive (a theory which would
lead to very odd conclusions if it were applied to the current controversy). What Freud actually proposed was not the idea that sexuality determines personality or even that sexual behavior is continuous with other behavior—he emphatically did not (for example) posit that sexual sadists are cruel or sexual masochists self-hating, or that fetishists dehumanize their relations with others. What he did maintain was that the etiology ("causal history" might be the best paraphrase) of neurosis lay in the repression (not suppression) of infant and childhood sexuality while perverts, spared neurosis, remained sexually fixed at one of the early way-stations of sexual development. It's all quite complicated. The much simpler idea, that one's style of sexual behavior indicated the state of one's personality and that a good, healthy sexual style indicates a good, healthy personality while other sexual styles are unhealthy and bad, is a very different creation.

Europe and England, in the 1880s and 1890s were experiencing intense agitation about the "woman question." There were attempts to get the vote, ladies were demanding entry to the professions, and so on. Literature was full of the "New Woman." It was in this atmosphere that the idea of sexuality being an indicator of healthy and unhealthy personalities began. And it began with the creation of . . . The Homosexual.

Before this time homosexual acts were certainly condemned as horrible (and men were occasionally hanged or burnt for them) but the idea of "the homosexual" as a certain sort of person did not exist. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries women (not only ladies, to judge from some of the literary evidence) showed moral nobility and purity by falling in love with one another, exchanging love letters, rings, and presents, and (when they were economically free to do so) expressing their "romantic friendships" and
“schoolgirl smashes,” by living together in “Boston marriages.” What the German doctors did in the 80s (and the English in the 90s) was to invent a new “disease,” a constitutional “abnormality” which could then be used to condemn all strong feeling between women (a thing that was, at the time, quite common). They did not, by the way, make same-sex genital activity the test of Lesbianism; what they indicted was a whole personality, which was (in addition to loving women, whether carnally or not) feminist, refused to marry, wished to go to college, lived independently, smoked, preferred female company, disliked female dress, and so on.

There is evidence, by the way, that some of the doctors, like Krafft-Ebing, meant to gain tolerance for “homosexuals” by insisting that they couldn’t help themselves—when will people learn that this ploy never works!—but the wildfire success of his (almost) original creation is due to its usefulness in maintaining the sexual (and other) status quo.2

News of this new and convenient disease hit England in the 90s and was public knowledge in the United States by the 1920s (though American intellectuals and literati were probably aware of it much earlier). Somewhere in here, in the twenties, I think, Freudian psychoanalysis became an American fad, and what happened then was perhaps inevitable.

Over here are the doctors, maintaining that homosexual behavior is one result of a diseased personality which also produces a whole lot of other behavioral symptoms (mostly unconventional gender behavior).

Over here is Freudian theory, maintaining that sexuality is central to the human personality.

Do you see what I see?

Put together the idea that refusal to abide by conventional gender rules is the sign of an abnormal personality and the idea that sexual behavior is at the root of personali-
ty, and . . . abracadabra! Psychiatric and popular bigotry as we all know and loathe it, in which unconventional sexual behavior is the sign of a "sick," "immature" personality while conventional sexual behavior indicates the opposite.

Do you see what I see now?

I sometimes wonder whether the Puritans in the PP controversy ever lived through the American fifties. Take a theory the only function of which was to condemn homosexuals, especially women, add to it political reaction and a last-ditch effort to enforce gender roles which were no longer economically viable (the movement of white women leaving home for wage-work began in the 50s) and you get the ideological viciousness that made that disgusting decade (and my adolescence) unbearable.

It was not that homosexuality was sick; everything was sick. If the way someone does sex, and with whom, and in what position, and how often, indicates the health or sickness of the whole personality, then every sort of sexual "misbehavior" becomes redolent of disease. Women who liked to be on top of their men in sex were sick; women who failed to achieve orgasms in coitus (sometimes or always), or had them in the wrong place, were sick; not marrying disclosed a fear of men, which was sick; adultery was sick; a difference in age between sexual partners (even a few years) was sick; women who were attracted to other women were sick; anybody who wanted more or less frequency of sex than "normal" was sick. And anything non-coital was, of course, sick (including masturbation). Interpreting sexual behavior, like interpreting the Bible, can go on forever. And it did. Everything was sick except monogamous, married, heterosexual coitus in the missionary position between spouses of the same color with simultaneous orgasms which left behind them (especially for the woman) no residual sexual excitement. And even all this was doubtful evidence of health if the woman was older than the man
by even a few years.

This theory (of the continuity of sexual behavior with other behavior) was never tested, let alone proved; the very few studies of the outcome of psychotherapeutic treatment that were done were so embarrassing that they have not been publicized in the literature of the field.

I suspect that the Puritans in the PP controversy are not aware of where their theory comes from (it's been part of our cultural surround for at least twenty-five years), that its success is purely mythological, and that its only function has been to oppress. For women—mostly Lesbians—to turn this garbage against other women is some sort of horrid cosmic joke which would be funny if it weren't so painful. Feminists of the late 60s-early 70s loathed these ideas; if you doubt it, read Natalie Shainess in *Sisterhood is Powerful*.3

But what about the idea that cultural institutions (like sexism) are determined by personal relations and the mass media? This idea is respectably feminist; it has been part of the mental furniture of the women's movement right from the beginning. If sexual style doesn't matter, still, cultural forces like popular art and literature, and the quality of personal relationships may be the primary determiners of social institutions; isn't it proper that we concentrate our efforts on them?

I'm sorry, no, they aren't and we shouldn't. Consider: For at least two centuries, American (and other) women have been confined to personal relations—especially sexual relations—as their special "sphere." For a somewhat shorter period American (and other) ladies were able, if they wished, to add to their "real" job the consumption of art in the form of novels, pictures, magazines, etc. and a few brave souls even won partial permission to dabble in producing the stuff. To believe that these activities are the primary
cause of society’s institutions (of which sexism is one) is simply to assert that what we can’t do (which includes almost all the money and power, and all the places in which big decisions are actually made) doesn’t matter. I have felt the helplessness that prompts such thinking, the utter rage at so-called “radical” movements which act as if we didn’t exist, and the fear that we can’t really enter the (still alien) public world. But to assert that the Women’s and Ladies’ Ghetto is—somehow—The Cause Of It All—will not stand up. The ideas that American soldiers collapsed under Chinese “brainwashing” because their moms brought them up badly or that women control the country’s wealth or that Black women are responsible for racist oppression are ideas of exactly the same order and their absurdity doesn’t disappear if you give them a positive, instead of a negative, content. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry when I hear—now—that women will make a feminist revolution by practicing good personal relations and the arts. There’s good sense in doing both of these things for your love of and need for them. To do these things because they will bring about the revolution does nothing but put an unbearable burden of perfection on personal relations, sexual relations and (to a lesser degree) the arts. It is also, to put it mildly, rather dumb. It’s true that sexism is often experienced most painfully and intimately in personal relations. It’s also true that most of the movement’s professional activity has been in the women’s professions: nursing, library work, teaching, and the arts. But why on earth should these evidences of ghetto-ization lead to valuing the ghetto-ized activities as the determiners of Western culture? Is it likely that the things we are allowed to do are primary determinants of our society? We’re not supposed to have power, remember.

Questions about what does determine society’s institutions and where the important decisions get made and by whom will drive the questioners either to incorporate an
analysis of class into their theory, or (since most men do not, by any stretch of the imagination, make the decisions that shape the world) lead them to distort their ideas of causality more and more to make feminist theory explain phenomena to which that theory becomes more and more inadequate. I say inadequate and not untrue; I believe that the same thing happens if you try to make class analysis do the job of feminism, without noticing that sexism (and racism) predate Capitalism and seem (so far) to have outlived it. The point is not to argue about which oppression is more important or which came first (arguments about which are “primary” mean this about 99% of the time) but to find how they interact right now. In fact, if I’m not mistaken, socialism, feminism, ecology and ethology may be about to converge on the quintessentially Marxist question: What makes history happen? or: Why do people do what they do?

To understand an animal species’ behavior the first question an ethologist asks is: What does the animal eat? Everything else, from its habits to its sexual signals, its teeth (if any), its chemistry, and the shape of its body flows from this one constraint. When you ask that question of human beings the answer is complicated by the fact that people make tools and do work; that is, human adaptation to a particular environment is cultural, not biological; technology, social institutions, and the minutiae of behavior are all cultural adaptations to one fundamental fact, where and how the society gets its calories.* So far we are only restating Marx’s “relations of production,” i.e. technology and natural resources. What’s new is adding the effects of population pressure—for despite our romancing about tribal societies, it’s only in the last century or so that any human societies have had anything like a genuinely safe and genuinely dependable way of controlling fertility. (The condom

* This word means energy sources of all kinds, not just energy used to grow food.
may turn out to be more productive of social change than
the atomic bomb.) In this view, institutions that enforce
male superiority are an adaptation to population pressure. If
increases in population, which mean less to go around in
any society with limited energy sources, cannot be other-
wise avoided, then female infanticide, the differential
neglect of little girls, and rather horrendous kinds of abor-
tion will become social necessities. To make such
necessities bearable—even acceptable—it's necessary to
make both men and women believe that women's lives are
less worthwhile than men's lives. Warfare is thus a very
dramatic and useful way of creating and enforcing male
"superiority." Tribal and village-band warfare (which
seldom results in permanent redistribution of land,
resources, or people) can result in a very striking differential
valuation of the sexes, and a ratio of boys to girls of about
160 to 100. (Prolonged nursing, which will work as an anti-
contraceptive only in conjunction with a high-protein diet,
may work with gathering-hunting societies, but in agrarian
ones, with carbohydrates as the major food source, it is just
not effective.) Modern warfare doesn't seem, at first glance,
to be the same phenomenon, but it may be no coincidence
that serious efforts at women's liberation and numbers of
people in the peace movement have appeared at approx-
imately the same time.4

If the above is inaccurate or incomplete, it's still at least a
possible working model of the way things happen, and it's
several orders of magnitude more complex than a theory
which takes into account only personal relations and the
mass media. It's also a theory that describes human
behavior as fairly rational, self-interested, and in-
telligible—which is not true of a theory which holds that
the way people do sex is the core of their personalities.

Two theories, both the products (one directly, the other
indirectly) of sexism, both inadequate.
Why does anyone believe them?

I don’t think we need go far afield to find the answers, nor are they particularly surprising. To insist on the central importance of the very activities you just happen to be restricted to is very ordinary human behavior and it’s also human not to be aware of the theoretical assumptions one has picked up from the cultural (broad sense) surround. What bothers me a good deal more is a theory that I suspect is often implicated here, and that is the idea that there are great differences between men and women, that these are innate, that they follow the lines assigned to them by the sexist status quo, and that progress therefore consists of replacing men by women and masculine qualities by feminine ones.

Such a belief certainly simplifies life, but it won’t stand up to the crucial historical question: Why has feminism occurred when it has and not centuries earlier—or never? When you use the biologic theory to explain sexuality the results become really mischievous; female sexuality is declared to be all that sexism says it is—S & M et. al. become not only horrifying but totally baffling (how can women be doing such things?); intimacy is the only permissible cue to passion; everything else is declared corrupt, and the true feminist goal becomes a Great Love—all this conforming almost exactly to the stuff we all loathed fifteen years ago—“Passive as underwater plants”5 (I am attacking the use of Rich’s poem by Dorchen Leidholt in a recent issue of the New Women’s Times, not the poem itself, of course.) and “as deep and mysterious as the sea, as strong and still as the mountain, as insistent as the wind”6—all of which sends a twinge of frightful, blasphemous irony up my spine and leads me to ask (with intentional rudeness) when Rod McKuen started writing for the women’s movement. Is it too late in the day to point out that sex is an impersonal appetite, that it’s not identical with love (or politics), that
there's no reason to think it should be, and that the social mystification which confuses the issue (and insists that sex be either polluted or angelic) has been one of the most important repressive agents of the good old feminine mystique? The idea that the practitioners of "feminist" sex have feelings and sensations higher and more holy than those enjoyed by the rest of us is sheer snobbery, like the antisemitism that assigns "intelligence" to Christians while Jews have only "low cunning" or the moralism that assigns "love" to the monogamous and "lust" to everyone else. I'm sorry to appear to be attacking Dorchen Leidholt in particular—she's far from alone in her ideas—but the political movement I joined thirteen years ago was against injustice, not "hard penile thrusts," which absurdity is, I take it, the direct result of unthinking, feminine-ist biologism.

Women have very often dealt with the bitterness of our sexual situation by idealizing our presumed difference from men, our supposed gentleness, our "incapacity" for sex without love, our (justified) fears, our massive ignorance, and our enraged bitterness at hearing men preach a "freedom" which we know isn't meant for us. We've never advanced an inch, doing this, but have only created further rage and further restriction. Paralysis is a high price to pay for avoiding the knowledge that we are not so very different from men, that feminism doesn't explain everything, and that, in our capacity as middle-class women, and as white women, we are oppressors as well as oppressed. I know that many feminists—for good reason—fear the sexism and sheer stupidity of the American Left, and many more feel already so embattled and deprived that asking them to recognize the privileges of their class position only leads to their absolute refusal to do so, since (most unfortunately) they conceive of this as moving back to an anti-feminist position which also obliges them to feel intensely guilty.

In the late sixties and early seventies feminists didn't
believe that the personal was political but that the personal led to the political—odd how the phrase has changed, no? Descriptive theories derived from personal experience have been replaced by prescriptive theories to which personal experience must conform. We have, in fact, developed a flourishing right wing in which feminist theory is rushing pell-mell ahead right into the nineteen-fifties.

No thanks. I’ve been there.

When and if the Great PP (It’s tempting to add Pornography and Prostitution and make it the quadruple-P) Controversy goes the way of the Lavender Menace, the issues behind it will remain: Those who want to avoid class analysis must continue to look for ever new “fundamental” causes of sexism, although this route leads right to the idea of biological causation, and that is to my mind, the counsel of despair. If men are plain evil and always have been, and women have always been good, why on earth should anything change now? The only way to avoid the pessimistic dead-end of the biological view is by positing direct supernatural intervention or the radiation-avoiding properties of our auras. I’ve heard both. (One woman explained to me once that “The Goddess is making more and more lesbians be born in order to overthrow the patriarchy.”) If the theoretical dead-end which feminism is in lets us turn either left (socialism) or right (biologism) then the third direction is straight up—but such stuff is a magical grasping-at-straws, an escape into the empty, empty heavens.

Years ago someone asked me if I was dedicated to the women’s movement and I said: No, the women’s movement is dedicated to me and the moment it stops having a living connection with the issues I perceive to be meaningful, I will spend my energies in some other place. From what I hear now about “feminist sensuality,” I have to conclude that I’m not only not a feminist; I’m not even a woman. Which was exactly what I kept hearing during the fifties,
strange to say. When I hear women denounced for deviant sexual behavior, when male lust is seriously advanced as a primary cause of women's oppression and the cultivation of certain kinds of sexuality, I begin to wonder where I am. Is this feminism or feminine-ism?

The feminism I know began as politics, not rules for living. To call X a feminist issue did not then mean that there was a good way to do X and a bad way, and that we were trying to replace the bad way with the good way. X was a feminist issue because it was the locus of various social pressures (which it made visible) and those social pressures were what feminism was all about. Makeup, for example, is a feminist issue not because using makeup is anti-feminist and scrubbing your face is feminist but because makeup is compulsory. Those who don't see the distinction are building a religion, not a politics. "Whatever isn't prohibited is compulsory" is not the banner under which I want to march.

I hope the great PP controversy will pass and become a quaint memory. I hope feminists will learn that a theory which describes only sexism is as incomplete as one that describes only class struggle. I hope that the biological theories will disappear and that feminists will learn that sex is an impersonal appetite and quite O.K. that way, but I wonder. There's a well-known quotation which seems to me a lot more likely, downright sinister, in fact, and here it is:

Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it.
NOTES


6. Andrea Dworkin, also quoted by Dorchc Leidholt, Ibid.

Pornography
By Women For Women,
With Love

Yes, there is pornography written 100% by women for a 100% female readership.
Surely I mean erotic?
Well, let's just say that to call something by one name when you like it and another when you don't is like those married ladies we all know who call what they do "making love" while what is done at singles bars is "shallow and trivial sex," and what homosexuals do is "perversion." (There are also those folks who call a work of art that supports the status quo "art" and works that question it "political.")

I tend to get restive at such honorifics, yet in the anti-pornography/anti-anti-pornography fight, "pornography" has become a loaded word, so for the purpose of this discussion we need a neutral one. Now that the title has caught your eye, and made some of you bristle, I'm going to talk about neither erotica nor pornography, but "sexual fantasy."

But first I must tell you about Star Trek.
In the late ’60s, Star Trek brought into science fiction fandom a large number of women. Science fiction readers are very often amateur printers who publish their own non-profit fan magazines, or “zines,” who attend science fiction conventions (and run them), and who know each other via all sorts of friendship networks, amateur press associations, and discussion groups. Pre-Star Trek fandom was roughly ninety percent male; Star Trek has moved the sex ratio much closer to equity, though nobody seems to know the exact figures. This influx of women is surprising in view of the fact that the Star Trek television show focused on the work relationship and friendship of three male characters: James T. Kirk, the ambitious, sometimes impulsive and emotional, rather macho Captain of the starship Enterprise; Spock, his First Officer and Science Officer, who is half human and half alien (from the planet Vulcan) and who is almost completely unemotional, logical, and self-controlled; and the ship’s doctor, Leonard McCoy, a peppery, outspoken cuss, who serves as a foil to the other two, who (because of their very different personalities) serve as foils to each other. While the usual science fiction fanzine consists of personal essays, letters, gossip, Amateur Press Association news, book reviews, and philosophical or scientific speculation, the Star Trek zines (certainly the ones I’m going to consider) specialize in the fan writers’ own stories and poems, which are based (often very minimally) on the TV show and now the two Star Trek movies. Within the Star Trek fan world lies a specialized sub-group of writers, editors, and readers who edit, write, and read fanzines called “K/S.”

“K/S” zines are anthologies of fan-written stories about the relationship between Kirk and Spock. The authors rate their own stories G, R, or X, and their premise is that Spock and his Captain are lovers. This fact is often assumed in the G-rated work, very often talked about in the R-rated poems and stories, and the X-rated work shows sex between the
two characters again and again and again. (And again. Ditto the illustrations.)

And all of the editors, writers, and readers are women.¹

If your autonomic nervous system does the nip-ups mine does upon reading merely the premise of this material, it’s quite irrelevant to talk about the beauty of friendship or the necessity of empathic compassion in human affairs. These are sexual fantasies. I’ve shared this material with eight women I know who like science fiction and *Sitar Trek*; they all shrieked with delight and turned bright red with embarrassment upon hearing only the premise of the K/S zines.

Briefly: not only are the two characters (Kirk and Spock) lovers (or in the process of becoming so; many of these are “first time” stories), they are usually bonded telepathically in what amounts to a life-long, monogamous marriage, which is often literally impossible for either party to dissolve. Sometimes the union of minds lasts only until death (often the death of one bondmate precipitates that of the other) but often it is assumed to last after it. Like Tristan and Iseult, the two are fated to love; even stories that don’t specifically state this fact assume it. Anyone who knows the K/S literature knows that in a sense this love already exists—an assumption which imposes a kind of retroactive inevitability on the K/S “marriage,” no matter whether the story chooses to comment on the inevitability of the relationship or not. Sometimes the stories show the death of one or the other or both, or separations (either final or temporary) or the impossibility of combining love with career. Moreover, even in the stories that end happily there is an extraordinary amount of frustration and delay; in these tales Spock’s Vulcan notions of propriety (emotionlessness and pure logic) are used to postpone the declaration and consummation of the love, or the conflict between Spock’s Vulcan and Human natures, or Kirk’s pride, or everybody’s scrupulousness and doubts and reasons not to—which
sometimes go on for sixty or seventy pages. These endless hesitations and yearnings resemble the manufactured misunderstandings of the female romance books (themselves sexual fantasies for women). In fact, so paralyzing are these worries and scruples and hesitations to the two characters involved that over and over again the lovers must be pushed together by some force outside themselves. Somebody is always bleeding or feverish or concussed or mutilated or amnesiac or what-have-you in these tales. Either both are starving to death on a strange planet, in which case they can at least die in each others' arms, or they are (temporarily) immured in a cave and Spock, concussed, thinks he's dreaming and acts on his passion for Kirk, or Kirk is suffering from brain-burn and is reduced, mentally, to childhood, in which condition he innocently makes sexual advances to Spock, who is horrified, not by Kirk's innocent actions, but by his own response.

In short, the stories, over and over, set up situations in which the two are not responsible. Other (R- and G-rated) stories present various beatings, blindings, and mutilations which necessitate not only intense emotional intimacy, but also one character's touching and holding the other with an eroticism only lightly veiled in the story (and probably not veiled at all in the readers).

So far the material sounds like the irreverent description by two of my friends: "Barbara Cartland in drag." But if that's all K/S stories are, why don't the women who read them and write them simply read romances and be done with it? Why the "drag"? Why project the whole process on to two male science fiction characters?

First of all, K/S is not about two men. Kirk is a man, to be sure, but Spock isn't; he's a half-human alien. Susan Gubar has speculated in a recent essay that when women s.f. writers write about aliens they are very often writing about
women. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith also suggest (brilliantly, I think) that although Spock is not literally female, his alienness is a way of “coding” into the K/S fantasies that their subject is not a homosexual love affair between two men, but love and sex as women want them, whether with a man or with another woman. Lamb and Veith cite many more details which support this view: briefly, that Spock’s reproductive biology is cyclical and uncontrollable, that although “a prince among his own people,” Spock is just another Fleet officer in a Federation ruled by Human men, that he is isolated both from Vulcans and from Humans (as non-traditional women are alienated from both traditional women and from men), that he has no command ambitions, that he often gets Kirk out of difficulties caused by Kirk’s impulsiveness and rashness (qualities Spock does not and cannot afford to display), that his Vulcan and Human sides are at war, that Vulcan is matrilineal, that he must be self-controlled and guarded, and so on. (The argument is much more detailed and convincing than I can mention here.) I would add that the lovers come from literally different worlds (the stories constantly emphasize the difference in their natures and backgrounds), and that the sexuality in the stories is only nominally male. (There are betraying details: the characters leap into anal intercourse with a blithe lack of lubrication that makes it clear that the authors are thinking of vaginal penetration, both approach orgasm with a speeded-up intensity of pelvic thrusting, and in many stories there is multiple orgasm.)

Although Spock encodes many female characteristics, what is striking in these stories (again I agree with Lamb and Veith) is the androgy of both characters, the way responsibility, initiative, activity, passivity, strength and weakness shift constantly from one to the other. Spock, for
example, is the “female” alien, but he is also physically stronger than Kirk, and is unemotional and an expert in scientific logic, all characteristics we associate with masculinity, while Kirk, his superior in the Federation hierarchy of command, and also the “tomcat” many-times-lover, has the emotionality and impulsivity we consider “feminine.” And so on.

As Lamb and Veith point out, the “marriage” of these two is in many ways ideal: neither has to give up “his” work in the world; both have adventure and love; telepathy provides lifelong commitment and the means of making such a union unbreakable and extremely intimate; and while both partners are “masculine” in the sense of being active in the world, they yet provide tenderness and nurturance for each other in a very “feminine” way. And the sex is marvelous. 4

And yet—

If you ask “Why two males?” I think the answer is that of eighteenth-century grammarians to questions about the masculine-preferred pronoun: “Because it is more noble.” Certainly the TV series made the Kirk-Spock friendship a matter of real respect and real love, in contrast with Kirk’s absolutely pro forma affairs with various women. Lamb and Veith simply state that no one (including themselves) can imagine a man and woman having the same multiplex, worthy, androgynous relationship, or the same completely intimate commitment.

Camilla Decarnin’s “Interviews with Five Fagbagging Women” in Heresies No. 12 have almost the same point to make. “A fagbag is a woman, whether lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, who devotes an important part of her social, affectional, or sexual attention . . . to homosexual men and who finds them erotically interesting because of their heterosexuality. This attention need not be overt; it can take the form of fantasies.” Decarnin’s explanation of the motive for
this behavior is almost identical with my explanation of K/S: "the woman recognizes in the faggot a socio-erotic position she herself would like to hold, as the recognized peer and the lover of a male, a position impossible for women in sexist culture to secure."

One of K/S's best writers says, "The problem is [women who] don't like their own bodies enough, they can't see themselves saving the universe once a week, they can't let their own sexuality out without becoming dependents or victims. So Kirk and Spock do it for them." She notes also, "the sex in Trek fiction (written by women for women) is female sexuality. . . . The readers . . . want to be strong, beautiful, complete adults who choose to love without limits, to trust utterly and never have their trust betrayed. . . ."

I agree with both writers. It's very, very difficult even for art, with its complexity and thoughtfulness, its inevitable alloy of reflection, its complicated evocations of emotion, to transcend the culture's givens. To do so in sexual fantasy (necessarily pretty primitive) is, I think, totally impossible. The K/S sex scenes are usually just as thin, just as repeti
tive, just as stylized, just as interchangeable, just as full of magic words, as those of male pornography, and just as anti-
art.

What! (says the reader). All that tenderness and empa-
thy and commitment and nurturance and scrupulous delay merely pornographic? On the contrary, the superiority of female sexual fantasy is proved by precisely those things: The lovers' personal interest in each others' minds, not only each others' bodies, the tenderness, the refusal to rush into a relationship, the exclusive commitment one to the other.

* For legal reasons—these writers and editors are open to legal action for viola-
tion of copyright, even though their work is very different from the TV and movie plays of Star Trek—I will not name any of the names of the women quoted or list their fanzines. I am quoting real people, though. Honest.
Is all this merely a sexual turn-on?

The subject gets very difficult here, but what I'm trying to make clear is that fantasy isn't simply an attenuated version of reality, and the same imagination that provides the tender loving care (in the extremely common "hurt-comfort" scenes for instance) also provides the battering, mutilation, and torture that are the pretexts for the nurturance. In fact, the nurturance in these stories is quite unreal, just as the misunderstandings, the scrupulousnesses, and the worries that keep the lovers from declaring themselves, are pure ritual, manufactured for the occasion. By "unreal" I don't mean simply glamorized or idealized but totally unlike reality; if your beloved appears at your door bleeding and battered in real life, you probably don't feel a rush of erotic tendresse. In fact, once you've called for an ambulance, covered said beloved with a blanket, made sure the patient's head is lower than the patient's feet, and administered what medical help you can, you are far more likely to go into your bathroom and throw up. The nurturance in these tales is like Bette Davis's resolution in Jezebel to care for Henry Fonda, who has yellow fever, while she looks heavenward (in a very becoming gown) and the sweetness of a thousand violins swells up on the sound-track. Nowhere do you see, for example, Fonda vomiting blood or Davis ugly with lack of sleep or resentful of her never-ending, gruelling contact with such romantic objects as full bedpans.

I do not believe that the supposed female virtues of the K/S material (and that of similar female fantasy, like the romances) are morally privileged—though some feminists talk as if this were so. Rather we have—ingeniously, tenaciously, and very creatively—sexualized our female situation and training, and made out of the restrictions of the patriarchy our own sexual cues.

For example, women wait. Women are (quite realistically) wary of heterosexual activity. Thus the endless analyses
of motives and scruples for pages and pages, a delay that is
in itself erotically arousing, since it’s a sexualization of what
is or was presented to us as “the real thing” for women.
(Decarain has suggested, in correspondence, that this
waiting be taken metaphorically, as related to women’s
need for long “foreplay” in order to achieve orgasm.)
Women must not initiate sexual activity. Thus the enor-
mous plot conventions which finally free the lovers to be
sexual, in which that lack of responsibility is itself exciting,
an intensifier of arousal, vulnerability, and emotion made
out of condition. Thus the “hurt-comfort” material, which
pictures nurturance as a lot of open sexual touching and
strong emotional intimacy (generally in the stories which
lack explicit sex) is (again) something that has become a sex-
ual cue, not anything resembling real help or real illness.
Thus also the material about the death of one or the other
or both (so ubiquitous, I’m told, that editors now refuse to
accept it!), the meditations at the graveside, the grief that is
somehow beautiful and exciting, not painful, all of it
delicious. And let’s not pride ourselves on the monogamy,
either; this is another patriarchal imposition which women
have sexualized—in fact, I believe it can be seen in the K/S
material (as in the romances) as a metaphor for intensity.
The telepathic union can also be read as a way of expressing
intensity and completeness, not duration, but here too sex-
ual expression waits on “love” while desire, by itself, is not
enough. Again I think we’re dealing with a sexualization of
the feminine condition. What was, historically, the female
terror of unmarried pregnancy, the main enforcer of
women’s anti-sexual training, has here been made into
something sexually arousing in itself. That is, in the K/S
world, the myth of romantic love works.

But that’s not all that’s in the material. In many ways the
K/S world is a great advance over the standard romances.
For one thing, there is explicit sexuality instead of the old
Romances’ one-kiss-in-the-moonlight. And I believe Lamb and Veith see rightly when they describe the androgyyny of the relationship, the impossibility (despite the coding into the Spock character of so many female traits) of assigning gender roles to either partner, ever—obviously this is very different from the romances, in which a woman’s problems in life are solved for her by a dominant male. The K/S insistence that the characters be first-class human beings is inevitably compromised by the social necessity of awarding that V.I.P. status only to men.

To me one important conclusion we can draw from these stories is that sexual fantasy can’t be taken at face value. Another is that no sexual cues are morally privileged (though some kinds of sexual behavior certainly are) since sexualizing any kind of behavior drastically changes the meaning of that behavior. Translated into real life, the “hurt-comfort” theme of K/S would simply be pernicious, from the woman who can do sex only under the guise of pity, to the lover who wants to keep her beloved dependent and powerless, in which condition she can then “love” the beloved. What excites in fantasy is both far more exaggerated than real life and not the same as in real life; that is, fantasy isn’t just a vicarious substitute for real experience; its meaning as experience becomes changed when it’s made into fantasy. Without understanding the rather complicated context of the fantasy, one “reads” it literally—like the woman friend of mine (new to Star Trek) who said in disgust that K/S was about rape and power games. This is simply not true in terms of the genre. In fact, the story that evoked this response is a classic K/S tale in which Spock goes into pon farr* again after pages and pages of agonized misunderstandings, thus (thank goodness!) providing a way for the lovers finally to declare themselves and make out

* A state of heat in which he must “mate” or die. Kirk must, of course, offer himself to save Spock’s life.
like crazy.

What seems to be happening in sexual fantasy is that any condition imposed on or learned with sexuality is capable of becoming sexualized, either as sex or a substitute for sex or as an indispensable condition of it. Such a process is certainly at work in the K/S universe. Yet it’s perfectly clear to me that K/S writers and readers don’t literally wish to become male any more than they literally want their dear ones to bleed and die in their arms or to die with their lovers. What they do want is sexual intensity, sexual enjoyment, the freedom to choose, a love that is entirely free of the culture’s whole discourse of gender and sex roles, and a situation in which it is safe to let go and allow oneself to become emotionally and sexually vulnerable. The literal conditions and cues of the K/S world, far from being impecably moral, are sexualizations of situations and behavior K/S fans did not choose and quite likely wouldn’t want in reality. Moreover they are situations and behavior that are absolutely antithetical to getting sexual and emotional satisfaction in the real world, which fact at least some of the K/S readers and writers know perfectly well.

I’m convinced, after reading through more than fifty volumes of K/S material (most of it “X-rated”) that only those for whom a sexual fantasy “works,” that is, those who are aroused by it, have a chance of telling us to what particular set of conditions that fantasy speaks, and can analyze how and why it works and for whom. Sexual fantasy materials are like icebergs; the one-tenth that shows above the surface is no reliable indicator of the size or significance of the whole thing. Sexual fantasy that doesn’t arouse is boring, funny, or repellent, and unsympathetic outsiders trying to decode these fantasies (or any others) will make all sorts of mistakes.

I’ve spent so much time on this material partly because it’s the only sexual fantasy I know of written without the inter-
position of interests that are political or commercial. In some ways these stories stick to the old Romance formula (I find this aspect of K/S destructive, although it too can be read metaphorically) but in others they put forth an emphatic claim to experience that radically transcends the conventional. These readers and writers want a sexual relationship that does not require their abandoning freedom, adventure, and first-class humanity (these are points I've taken from Lamb and Veith), they want sexual enjoyment that is intense, whole, and satisfying, and they want intense emotionality. They also want (and I find this absolutely fascinating and aesthetically very valuable) to create images of male bodies as objects of desire. One of the worst things forced on us in the name of "femininity" is passivity, a distortion created by the heterosexual institution and a guarantee of sexual and human paralysis. The writers and readers of these fantasies can do what most of us can't do in reality (certainly not heterosexual reality), that is they can act sexually at their own pace and under conditions they themselves have chosen. The K/S stories, ritualized as they are, are the only literature I've ever seen in which women do describe male beauty—not "masculinity," mind you, but the passive, acted-upon glories of male flesh. Some of this is very well done, e.g., the lovely convention that Spock, when sexually aroused, purrs like a giant cat, and Kirk praising his lover's alien genitals as a beautiful flower, an orchid. (Shades of Judy Chicago!)

Until recently I assumed, along with many other feminists, that "art" is better than "pornography" just as "erotica" is one thing and "pornography" another; and just as "erotica" surpasses "pornography," so "art" surpasses "erotica." I think we ought to be very suspicious of these distinctions insofar as they are put forward as moral distinctions. I've said elsewhere that material presented outright as a sexual turn-on and nothing else can be a lot less harmful
than material that is presented as if it were a thoughtful and complex depiction of real life. One of the great virtues of the K/S stories is that there is far less misery and death in the X-rated stories, by and large, than there is in the G- and R-rated ones. I think we are probably right in seeing sexual repression as a very important source of violence in the patriarchy—though we must at once remember that we're talking about all spontaneous pleasure, not just sex, and about quality, not just quantity. (Elizabeth Fisher puts forward this idea in Woman's Creation.)

Wilhelm Reich (with whom Fisher agrees) also said flatly that if you lift sexual inhibitions part-way (which is certainly the situation today, with the mass media force-feeding us plastic sex which is not only limited as to color, age, gender, and "flawless" personal appearance, but which is still very rigid about tactility and the real nature of real human sexuality and emotionality), you get sadism—by which Reich did not mean S & M (he did not discuss it at all in The Sexual Revolution) but rape, violence, brutality, and callousness.

If female sex fantasies can't be taken at face value, maybe male fantasies can't either. Books like Punished Slut (I have fifteen S & M paperbacks on my desk and am wading through them) don't excite me, so perhaps I shouldn't speculate about them. But it seems to me that such fantasies may be a kind of half-way house out of violence rather than into it. This isn't the common feminist view, but I think the comparison holds: if female K/S fantasies are complex and multi-dimensional and if one of their achievements is the reversal of women's substitution of romance for explicit sexuality, then (if I read them correctly) male fantasies of violence, either accompanying sexual activity, serving as a precondition for it, or as a cue to it, are attempts to partly undo the violence in the "respectable" part of the culture, where violence has been substituted for sexual enjoyment. I believe that movies like "A Clockwork Orange" or "Apoca-
lypse Now” are far more dangerous than The Sadistic Sisters of Saxony. The latter are at least sexual. I agree with Fisher and Reich that quality counts, and by “sex” I mean pleasure that isn’t joyless, furtive, perfunctory, unspontaneous, forced, guilty, partial, or trivialized (or made into a plastic goodie, either). I’m convinced now that the patriarchy damages male sexuality just as it does ours, though perhaps less than ours and certainly not in the same way. (Gay men don’t seem to me exempt from the process; they’re raised in the same culture and educated much the same.) Feminists who live apart from men (as one heterosexual feminist told me) forget how limited and foolish most of them are, and how thoroughly they are controlled by the culture’s expectations. From the viewpoint of the female situation, I think we sometimes see men’s sexual freedom as greater than it is, because it is in fact greater than our own. If you see male freedom as absolute, or close to absolute, then male fantasies of sexual violence will look, in a sense, worse than they are. We know that women don’t want to be raped; episodes in female fantasies that look like rapes really are something else, i.e., Will somebody, something, for heaven’s sake, enable me to act? I think male pornography in which a woman is “raped” (i.e., made to experience sexual pleasure against her will) may be struggling with a similar problem of permission—not that the man can’t initiate sexual activity, but that he can’t let go while doing it. And without letting go, self-abandonment, whatever you call the opposite of self-controlled and rigid behavior, sexual activity will be minimal and partial.

I’ve always thought that patriarchal male sexuality must be a rather difficult business. To over-simplify: A partner’s hostility or boredom is ordinarily a real turn-off—and yet this is exactly the situation under patriarchy, where so many women are not interested, not excited, not participants, and not happy. Yet men must penetrate and ejacu-
late if there are to be any babies—and so the problem for patriarchy (whether you think of this as a one-time invention or a constant process) is to construct a male sexuality which can function in the face of a woman’s non-cooperation or outright fear and hostility. Of course such a sexuality is, in fact, common. It is also furtive, guilty, miserable, unspontaneous, forced, unfree, and minimally sensual. No wonder Philip Slater writes about the perfactoriness of sex for so many men (“the quicker it is done with, the better”) and maintains that women’s complaints (“he’s only interested in sex, in my body”) are missing the point: “A man who behaves this way is not interested in sex, either. . . . he is interested only in releasing tension.” Slater interprets male fantasies of rape as twofold: “First, it expresses the common masculine wish for some kind of superpotency” (notice: not superreactivity!) and “it is men who have bottled up feelings and long to burst their controls. But since this yearning endangers the whole of our culture it cannot be allowed direct expression and is projected onto women. . . . the emotional specialists in our society.”

It sounds odd to say that men’s fantasies of rape have their roots in a desire to be overwhelmed and acted on, but I think this may be at least part of the truth. Women, after all, fantasize “rape” as the solution to issues of permission and forced passivity; why shouldn’t men (who must deal with the issues of forced activity) use the other side of the same fantasy?

What frightens me is not those sleazies on my desk (in one of which a woman puts needles through a man’s nipples). It’s the mainstream American habit of substituting violence for sex and presenting the result as “real life” and, even, Heaven help us!, “decency.” In the one Star Trek TV show in which Spock went into pon farr, the first twenty minutes titillated female America with the promise of the controlled, logical Vulcan engaging in uncontrolled sexual
behavior (a consummation greatly to be wished). But the second twenty minutes gave us, not sexuality (which the K/S writers know perfectly well ought to be there and which they do put in their stories) but a good old (and very disappointing) American fight—between Kirk and Spock! I certainly prefer sex. Think also of “Klute” in which Jane Fonda as a call-girl (aha! bad) is threatened by one man and saved by another. And for a particularly nasty example, try the Hitchcock Hour’s 30-second advertisement of a few years ago: a montage of different women screaming in terror. Or the plastic cheesecake of Playboy, as drearily fake as the expensive stereos and fancy cars the readers probably don’t have either. Get stuck on those photos of women and your sexual failure is assured; for one thing, women don’t come airbrushed.

Well, I’m speculating. What I’m sure of is that we do not have nearly enough knowledge about female sexuality. For example, “masochistic” rape fantasies have bedevilled the women’s movement for a decade as if they were a literal representation of what women want, when they are quite obviously nothing of the kind. I’m sure there are female S & M “tops” who like S & M because they’re into power over others—but I also have two friends, one of whom still does S & M and one who dropped it non-traumatically, and they like(d) it because they found it a sexual (not characterological) turn-on. Similarly, there may be women in the K/S network who are really turned on by a lover’s illness or mutilation—but I doubt it, since what the writers obviously want is not twenty-four-hour-a-day nurse duty or people really bleeding and dying in their arms, but the sexual turn-on that the fantasy of touching and holding the lover gives them.

Fifteen S & M paperbacks is probably no representative sample, nor have I read all the K/S fanzines. Women probably read romances in much greater numbers than the K/S
readers anyway. (About 125 zines have been published since 1975-6, in editions of 500-1500.) Yet in all these stories I've found a lot less to complain about than I can find simply by turning on my TV at random on any evening at all. I don't believe that men are taught to be violent by commercialized sexual fantasy; there are far too many worse teachers around. If anything, commercial, male-oriented sexual fantasy is (I suspect) a half-assed attempt to undo masculinity training, rather than the reverse. I don't want to idealize it, but it's certainly less offensive to me than (for example) "The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Hemingway's macho-misogynist short story which was taught to me (to us!) as "great literature," full of "eternal truth," and so on.

Many feminist women seem only to be following their gut reactions in hating male sexual fantasy and spending so much of their energies on it. I agree that it's important to know one's gut reactions, but before we make the jump from "It offends me" to "Therefore it is bad," to "Therefore we must fight it" we need to know a lot more than we do.

I hope I haven't offended anyone by calling K/S "sexual fantasy." If it weren't, I wouldn't pay any attention to it. I love the stuff, I love the way it turns me on, and I love its attempt to establish a very radical androgyny in its characters. So many feminist creations of Amazons and Goddess-worshippers and so on simply don't work—most are very thin—but K/S works, if you know and like Star Trek, and (as I mentioned) it is the only sexual fantasy by women for women that's produced without the control or interposition of censorship by commercial booksellers or the interposition of political intent by writers or editors. It's also a labor of love for the women involved, since it is (and must be, because of the possibility of lawsuit) non-profit. I find it raw, blatantly female, and very valuable and exciting, a judgment I owe to Lamb and Veith, since they had the
courage of their reactions and continued to study this material for close to six months, while I merely got embarrassed (because, I think, the stuff was so female and my response to it so intense) and hid it away—in the closet, of all places! I know now that it does not mean what it seems to mean—that we don’t like sex except in committed relationships, that we think about “love” all the time, that we are sentimental, that we are altruistic, or any other sexist litany of our supposed virtues. What is so striking in K/S is the raw sexual and emotional starvation the writers are expressing so openly—and the attempt to picture a totally androgynous situation, not “Brigitte Bardot scotch-taped to John Wayne” (as I once called “androgyny”) but a situation in which questions about who is the man and who is the woman, who’s active and who’s passive, even who’s who, cannot even be asked. This is very heady stuff. Instead of presenting us with a couple who are of different sexes but the same species, K/S creates a couple who are of different species, but the same sex. I’ve already mentioned why that sex is pictured as “male”—and what subverts that “maleness” and makes it ambiguous—but the stuff works (at least on some of us) as fantasy. Such statements cannot be made in realistic literature, and one of the crucial things the K/S material has done for me is to make me glad I write science fiction and fantasy. And now, if you will excuse me, I must go back to my ancient Vulcan castle with the carved bedposts where I have left my two characters, Guess Who and Guess Which, in a very dramatic and painful situation. In fact, I left Spock preparing to beat Kirk, whom he has bought as a slave in an alternate universe in which violent Vulcan (Spock’s planet) never reformed. Of course the point of the whole scene is that Spock can’t bear to do any such thing because he is madly in love with Kirk. So he smites his forehead with his hand (or some similar gesture) and rushes out to agonize.
Meanwhile Kirk (who's of course in love with Spock) agonizes too, but in the opposite direction, so to speak.
They will do this for a long as I can contrive, and then they will make great music together, also as long as I can stretch the scene out.

Yum.
And so on.

Author's Notes

An editor: "It is pornography for women produced by women." Another notes that readers "fear their own interest in K/S will be interpreted as lesbian by friends and family."

About the "hurt-comfort theme," a writer friend of mine writes, about her playing at adventure with a friend (both were preadolescent): "An increasingly regular feature of this business was that characters who were sworn and bitter enemies were continually forced into situations in which one... would be wounded in some specifically painful manner and the other would grudgingly but lovingly, take care of him."

In "Big Brother is Trekking You" by James Wolcott (Village Voice, 2/2/76) Wolcott describes "Star Trek Lives!" by Jacualine Lichternberg, Sondra Marshak, and Joan Winston (a commercially published book): "... these women have their libidinal thermostats turned up pretty high... [Fans'] stories... are sexually charged-up... the return of the runaway boys on the biggest damn raft you can imagine... 'Star Trek' also hooks the women by
the sexual tension beneath that buddy-buddiness. . . . Spock becomes a parody of the unreachable woman. He’s practically an extra-terrestrial Garbo.” (Wolcott’s “raft” refers to Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, in which Fiedler derives a theory of American fiction from American novelists’ male pair-bonding. Lamb and Veith also begin their first paper by citing Fiedler.)

A newspaper-catalogue of media fiction *in toto* (of which *Star Trek* is only a part) lists twenty-two kinds of media fiction, from *The Chronicles of Amber* to *The Wild Wild West*. The list includes *Dracula*, *Battle Star Galactica*, *Sherlock Holmes* (!), *MASH*, and *Hill Street Blues*. One story I have read from *Starsky and Hutch* media fiction, as well as one story I’ve managed to find from *Magnum*, P.I. media fiction both treat the male pair as Spock and Kirk are treated in K/S fiction, *i.e.* the two are lovers, yet somehow without being homosexuals. (There is no homosexual subculture presented, no awareness of being derogated, no friends or family, absolutely no gay friends, no gay politics, and so on. The men are masculine, even macho figures—and somehow they are lovers without ever thinking of what they do as “homosexuality.” I would guess that other male-bonding pairs are treated in the same way in other media fiction.)
NOTES

1. Several K/S editors give these statistics. Moreover, only one piece of fiction or poetry out of forty volumes bears the statement that it was written by a man. The zines themselves always refer to writers, readers, or editors as "she."


4. Lamb and Veith, unpublished.


6. In one self-parody (K/S writers enjoy such pieces and write them surprisingly often) the two alternately beat each other in the head with a shovel, and then say, "Let me be with you in your hour of pain," and similar statements. The self-parody seems to me to be a tongue-in-cheek recognition of the necessity for hurt in order to show comfort.


8. I am thinking of Samois, Coming to Power. Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M, Up Press (Palo Alto, California: 1981). The purpose of the book, stated in several places, is explicitly political, as well as erotic.


Remember Uncle Max? Every woman I know has an Uncle Max. Say you're fourteen, at a family Passover celebration in a room so crowded that changing seats is almost impossible, and Uncle Max (who's your great-uncle, really, in his 60s) has suddenly begun telling you how much he loves you (he's never had two words for you before), how wonderful you are, how you're his favorite niece, and meanwhile he keeps kissing you sloppily on the cheek (or the mouth) and holding the back of your neck with one hand while he strokes your forearm with the other. You manage to get up and make your way to the kitchen, where you indignantly tell your mother what's happened and she says, looking past you with unfocused eyes, "I'm sure you must be mistaken, dear." You (angrily): I'm fourteen, not a baby, and I know what's happening, &c.
Mother: Well, I’m sure it’s only your imagination, but if it bothers you, just sit somewhere else.

Once I had remembered Uncle Max (he came up in a discussion between me and a friend in which we finally realized we were talking past each other) all sorts of memories began to come back, like the fifteen-year-old male stranger at a party when I was twelve who had grabbed my wrist hard enough to leave bruises, dragged me to a couch, and sat there kissing me while his fingers dug into my flesh, like the boy (he must have been fourteen) who said to twelve-year-old me in high school, “Hey, baby, your pants are showing,” like my mother’s telling me in a strangely embarrassed voice when I was going to summer camp, “Remember, boys can’t get pregnant.” Or my friend’s mother who, upon hearing on the radio that a woman had been beaten up in the subway at three A.M., said, “No decent woman would be out there alone at that hour.”

Are there more? Oh, yes, lots more, from the constant obbligato of Don’t go out alone after dark, Don’t go into “bad” parts of town, Don’t let boys go too far, Don’t get “in trouble,” Don’t “get caught,” Don’t ever visit a boy’s apartment, Don’t stay out after midnight, Don’t go to a local doctor for contraception or you’ll be expelled (this was in college), to another male fifteen-year-old who at camp said as he passed the counselors’ bungalows, “Menopause Alley,” to the girl friends who kept worrying aloud if “he” would respect them if they went “all the way” and the friend, with whom I conducted a little theater in our twenties, who came out of the women’s room, saying in tones of intense relief, “Thank God it’s come.” When I was twelve or thirteen at my parents’ New Year’s Eve party I was pulled out on the living-room floor by our family dentist, to dance. Mind you, nobody likes a dentist, but this one (a friend of the family) never completed a filling in less than an hour, and didn’t ever let me know about novocaine. (I was sixteen before I
found out that there was such a thing as local anaesthesia.)
This was the detestable, incompetent boob who insisted on
dancing with me. I hated it and I hated him so I shrank
away. He pulled me ostentatiously close and grinned.

And everybody laughed.

My mother laughed. My father laughed. The guests
laughed. And in my head a voice said: *Come on now, this
isn’t serious, You’re oversensitive; after all, he didn’t rape you,
did he? It’s all in fun. Don’t be a prude* (and so on).

I hear this voice still. I suspect most women do. It chided
me in college when I solved the conflict between being an
artist and being a woman, when the choices presented to
me and my friends were: 1) Marry so you can have sex in
safety, and thereby prove your inferiority and vulnerability,
2) stay celibate and go crazy (it was an article of faith then
that all spinsters were “sexually repressed” and therefore
diseased, 3) have sex outside marriage and die of an illegal
abortion, or 4) become a Lesbian—a state so unthinkable
and unspeakable, so utterly absent from anyone’s view of
reality that it probably didn’t exist—but was, of course,
unutterably criminal, insane, and destructive at the same
time.

Shall I go on? Shall I mention the movies and plays in
which “non-sexy” women were ridiculed? Or the ones in
which ultra-“sexy” Marilyn Monroe was ridiculed? (My,
some folks are hard to please!) Or what Erica Jong calls the
King Kong school of art? As late as the mid-seventies a
young male poet swaggered on the stage at a University
where I taught, and prefaced his first poem by grinning and
saying, “Women don’t like this one.” Earlier, in the late 60s,
at the same institution, poetry readings inevitably included
hairy young men who exclaimed, “Fuck you, America! I
want to ram my cock up your asshole!” At which several
women students whom I had carefully encouraged to at-
tend, got up and left, surmising quite correctly that their
own poetry—and their presences—were not welcome.

I remember a discussion in the mid-seventies in which all the group (including me) said that their parents had been liberal and honest about sex, whereupon the group leader said, "Did they ever tell you about your clitoris?" and we all looked at one another and were struck dumb. A close friend of mine was dragged (at age eleven) into the boys' bathroom by a group of boys; they handled her breasts, and when she started to cry, they told her she had to like it because she had big boobs and women with big boobs "liked it." And there were the exquisitely sensitive young men of my 'teens, artists all, who chided us young women for not being free, beautiful, and spontaneous, by which they meant putting out for them—this in an era when abortion was illegal!—and one who said to me scornfully only a few years ago when I asked for his company to the subway (in New York), "I didn't think you were like all those other women."

If I stop now, don't believe there isn't more. There's much more, like the psychoanalyst of my twenties telling a woman who had almost been raped, "But you must have known there was something wrong with him. Why did you want to punish yourself?" (This was a woman who'd attended the singles dance, where she met this man, at the psychoanalyst's express suggestion.)

If I cite so much from my own life, it's because my life has been in no way exceptionally or spectacularly bad. I wasn't battered as a child, wasn't raped by father, stepfather, or mother's boyfriend, didn't have an illegal abortion, didn't run away from home to find that the only way I could keep eating was street hustling, didn't get pregnant while unmarried (or while married either) and never went through the pressures of outright rebellion against gender norms. I wasn't seduced or abandoned or beaten up, and I wasn't even caught masturbating—except once, come to think of it, when my parents told me I might "hurt myself" (I knew this
was a lie)—and oh yes, they caught me playing doctor with friends at the age of five and solemnly gave me the same warning. And, my word, I’ve forgotten the psychoanalyst I saw in my twenties (for symptoms of a chronic physical disease which was diagnosed fifteen years later) who told me that I envied the male penis. (I was willing to believe this, but hadn’t the faintest notion of what to do about it.)

Perhaps the worst thing about our sexual training as women (if I’ve been citing heterosexual incidents it’s because the vast majority of women, Lesbian or not, are brought up in heterosexual families and learn their lessons about sex from heterosexual standards and situations) is the enormous social pressure not to see or name the kinds of incidents I’ve been describing: to view them as trivial, to discount them, to accept them “tolerantly,” to pretend to enjoy them or find them funny or simply to deny that they exist or existed or, worst of all, to deny that they are painful and out of our control.

Take a woman raised like this (and we are all raised like this, more or less) and expose her to arguments about “sexual liberation” and her response is likely to be that men are taking too many liberties with women as it is. What I need (she is likely to say) is safety and respect, not any more “liberation.” Expose such a woman to pictures of women meant to turn men on, and she will—quite simply—become enraged. Show her anything designed to titillate men sexually, whether violent or not, and you will rouse the envy and rage of a whole lifetime—and it is utterly enraging, although the envy is not at all the envy of concrete sexual acts. Rather it’s the envy of men’s freedom, the envy of those who’ve been battered into choicelessness and silence for those who are entitled to speak and make choices.

Sexuality for men (including gay men, as far as I can see) is by and large a realm of free choice, limited to be sure by practical considerations, but not limited by the very fact of
being male. Men are “entitled to” sex.

Sexuality for women is a realm of helplessness and unpleasantness, in which bad and painful things are done to you that you can’t control, in which you must “go along” with male behavior even when you dislike it, in which you are not entitled to your own wishes and your own enjoyment, and haven’t even the privilege of seeing or naming the above facts. In the light of this truth, the anti-pornography movement is not only understandable; it’s absolutely necessary. A society that claims that women’s real trouble is “sexual repression” (whatever that is) badly needs to be enlightened. We aren’t sexually repressed; we’ve been sexually battered and sexually brutalized. It’s about time this particular vileness were exposed for what it is, once and for all.

But that’s not the whole truth.

I also remember passionate “friendships” with girls and women, especially the friend who wanted me to kiss her and hold her. I remember necking in the front seat of a car at sixteen with a young man I’d lusted after for weeks, and being gloriously, sexually high for days. I remember endless crushes on movie stars, mostly male. I remember (with enormous pleasure) Mae West’s “She Done Him Wrong,” and some blazingly incandescent experiments with masturbation in my twenties. I remember coming out of a Gay Liberation Front lecture at thirty-three into the most luminously beautiful June twilight I’ve ever seen, and saying to myself over and over, that Lesbianism was real, that people really did it, and that I wasn’t the only one and I hadn’t invented it. I remember desire so pure and intense that it was almost enough just to feel it, I remember touching the delicate and precise helmet of bone under a beloved’s fair, fluffy hair, I remember a New Year’s Eve party where grown-up women went about playing wonderful kissing games, like kids. I remember, years later, another car
(cars seem to be some kind of adolescent American theme) and a curly-haired young man with a delicious amber moustache.

I think that for women sexuality is inescapably double. Even women whose sexual education has been horrendous (for example, those who are raped repeatedly by adult male relatives) have also to deal with some positive feeling, much of it sexual; even women whose experiences have been much more positive than typical cannot entirely escape this culture’s negatives. I suspect that even Lesbians who’ve never had so much as a heterosexual thought must still deal in some fashion with the tangled mess sexism makes of sex.* Not to mention the male side of this equation, that is, the glamorization of male power and violence and the sentimentality about women and “family” which is the obverse of the violence. Sex is ecstatic, autonomous, and lovely for women. Sex is violent, dangerous, and unpleasant for women. I don’t mean a dichotomy (i.e. two kinds of women or even two kinds of sex) but rather a continuum in which no one’s experience is wholly positive or negative, and to which different women will give very different weightings.

I think this doubleness of experience may explain the bitterness of the fight against pornography (to which I’ve contributed as much as anyone, I’m afraid) and the phenomenon of the sides being so very horrified by each other because they are perpetually talking past each other. When A attacks violence and B hears her attacking sexual freedom, B will defend sexual freedom—and A will hear her defending violence. You see how it goes, round and round and louder each time, though A doesn’t intend to attack

*Women who’ve been exclusively Lesbian from a very early age probably face a different set of problems growing up. It would be interesting to know how much of the anti-pornography movement such women make up. My impression is that most of those active in the anti-pornography movement are either heterosexual or Lesbian feminist—that is, women who have spent a good part of their lives as heterosexuals.
sexual freedom *per se*, and B doesn’t mean to defend violence.

I think a woman’s position on this continuum (which can change even from week to week) will determine on which side of the pornography issue she finds herself. The more your life has had to do with the violence and cruelty of (male) sexuality, the more salient these are to you, the more you will attack (male) sexuality as violent, callous, and cruel. And you will be perfectly correct. The more your life has had to do with the autonomy and joy of sexual expression, whether you have had to work your way through to this joy or not, the more sensitive you will be to issues of sexual suppression, and the more you will tend to defend sexuality *per se* as a valuable good. And you will be perfectly correct.

To make the whole business even worse, on the anti side there’s not only sensitivity to the violence of patriarchal sex, but also *some* women who perceive any kind of open expression of sex as dangerous and brutal. And the other side has *some* women who perceive sexual expression as so important and valuable that any kind of sexual expression, no matter what it is, is fine. There are, indeed, *some* women who do get off on power, *some* who proselytize. (I suspect that they’ve simply felt really sexual for the first time in their lives, and are treating sexual pleasure as their own exclusive property.)

I am now more sensitive to the issue of sexual suppression than I was five years ago, when I was more sensitive to the issue of sexual dangers and pains; *therefore* I’ve been perceiving the opposite side as inexplicably crazy. No doubt they’ve perceived me the same way. We’re both right—not about the craziness, I mean, but about sex. It is inescapably double. Depending on the kind of attention we pay to it (which may even vary from day to day or mood to mood) we will stress one side or the other—and mis-hear our op-
posite numbers on the other side. Each will perceive the other as having gone mad and we'll end up with just what's been going on for the past few years, with me passionately denouncing Andrea Dworkin, for example (for which I'm very sorry and wish to apologize publicly) and Robin Morgan, in her new book, not only denouncing Pat Califia (which I rather expected, considering the whole mess-up that's been going on) but also wasting invective on Deirdre English, of all people! I suspect that Morgan has gotten her information second hand (she cites the sloppy and sensational San Francisco Chronicle for some important figures and ignores For Her Own Good, a fine piece of work by Deirdre English and Barbara Ehrenreich) or is simply so caught up in the whole mishearing, misperceiving mess that she's as bitter and quick to denounce as everyone else. Something of the same kind happens when an anti-porn activist describes with horror the photograph of a woman in a sex magazine who's lying on her back with her knees up and spread and is spreading her labia apart with her fingers. I have heard this position called degrading and humiliating, though as far as I can see the position indicates only that the woman wants to be penetrated, which certainly isn't in itself degrading or humiliating. And yet in the context of the whole sexist treatment of women by men, the picture is another assertion of men's property in women and men's control over women.

Meanwhile, I hear that in this city, some woman tried fist-fucking another and caused permanent physical damage, hospitalization, and surgery in her victim. But what about a friend of mine who did S & M (she's a very good person) who described it to me as mostly play-acting? The fantasies involved were fantasies of violence, true, but nobody she knew wanted anything like that to happen in reality. And surely there's nothing wrong with that—except that fantasies like those, acted out by men and sold to the public as
depictions of reality, are among the things that create a cultural atmosphere in which rape and property in women are seen by men as “glamorous” and promoted as “natural.”

Is there any way of establishing that we are not at each others’ throats? That what’s driving us all crazy is that women’s experience of sexuality under sexism is inescapably double? I think only c.r. groups have a chance of succeeding in this matter and then only if the groups absolutely outlaw statements about women in general and any judgment of particular women’s practices and everybody’s political positions about everything. We must start with our own experiences—NOT judgments or opinions—and then we may have a chance of undoing the wickedness done to us by this violent and antisexual society. The con game that’s been practiced on all of us has been the equation of sex with violence, as if we have to choose between being sexual and victims of violence on the one hand or no-violence-therefore-no-sex on the other. If we detest the violence inherent in our sexual experiences in the world as it is, the culture gives us to understand that we are denying sexuality itself; if we choose the positive good of sexuality itself (and I certainly believe that sexual expression is per se a very valuable and important thing) the culture then insists that we must also choose violence. If some of us go a little gaga and talk as if any exhibition of sexuality (especially male sexuality) were humiliating and coercive, it’s no wonder. Meanwhile others of us are going out of our gourds in the other direction, insisting that even obviously hostile books and pictures are redeemed because they have sex in them at all.

Trouble is, we’re both right—and both wrong.

Meanwhile nobody has bothered to define pornography or S & M or even prostitution (sometimes) in any precise and objective manner, so that we can begin to talk about them in a reasonably analytical and non-judgmental way.
After all, before you can judge something as good or bad, you do have to know what it is. And we need to stop calling “obscene” anything we don’t like. We also need, I think, to find out a lot more about prostitutes and the only way to do this is to talk to the prostitutes themselves. (An early conference on prostitution, I am told, was an embarrassing flop precisely because this wasn’t done.) I also think—and here I do disagree with a good many women—that psychoanalyzing somebody else’s experience or fantasies (especially without listening to their account of it) is necessarily ineffective, however passionately you may feel about the subject. The only people capable of analyzing what fantasies really mean are those to whom the fantasies appeal most.* I have heard feminists explain the horrible psychic depths of S & M’ers to me and S & M’ers describe with relish the twisted Puritanism of anybody who doesn’t like them. This is very much like hearing monogamists decry the revoltingly neurotic motivations and moral degradation of the promiscuous—not that they know anyone like that, of course, nor have they—Heaven forbid!—been promiscuous themselves. And so on and so on. Is it necessary to point out that these “explanations” and “analyses” are worth exactly zero? They are passionate self-defenses, not analyses of phenomena or people. In the first issue of Trivia: a Journal of Ideas, in an essay called “Sadomasochism” Kathleen Berry states that condemnation of the feminist anti-pornography movement “can threaten the very existence of feminism” and that when Gayle Rubin (in Coming to Power) asks for a repeal of all sex laws “except those dealing with actual, not statutory, coercion” what she really means is that threats of death are not coercion. Clearly, we are talking past each other!

When c.r. groups first formed, what we brought to them

*This doesn’t mean that they will analyze them, or that their analyses will be accurate; it means only that they can know the context of such fantasies.
were those areas in which we felt most crazy, most weak, most wrong, and most defeated. I believe that knowledge of our real sexual histories (that is, not our political opinions) may be similarly difficult to feel and express. Such a task, considering our own tangled feelings and the inescapable contradictions built into female sexual experience by this culture, demands an honesty that will, at times, produce intense shame and (I would expect) feelings of defeat and self-condemnation. These must be listened to, not short-circuited by shoulds and oughts. What we need is the gritty reality of what we really feel, what we really want (however “disgusting” or “wrong” it seems to be) or how “anti-feminist.” These feelings are very painful.

They are also messages.

Before we can know what something means, we must allow it to enter consciousness in full force. Is horror at something “fear swollen by a hidden wish” (as one psychologist, writing about something completely different, once said)? Is bravado merely hiding self-hatred? And so on.

I hope I won’t be misunderstood here to be saying that our troubles with sexuality are “merely psychological” or due to our training in the past but not to constant pressures today. Any message our sexuality or feelings about it gives us is bound to be about us and our society; if there’s any piece of crucial feminist knowledge, this is it.

If only we can do this, what an enormous gain it will be for the whole women’s movement! I think we all feel right now that sexuality is a crucial issue for feminism—nobody would be so upset if it weren’t. I don’t think we’ll be in shape to take on sexuality as an issue without a lot of consciousness-raising about female sexuality and female sexual fantasy.

Even so, pornography seems to me a very tricky issue merely from the point of view of tactics, and we might do well to direct our anger elsewhere, at least for a while. Not
only is feeling about this issue very divided in the women's community, it's an issue that is bound to be misperceived by the culture at large as anti-sexual no matter how many declarations we make to the contrary. Some women talk as if pornography were the one single cause, or the most important single cause, of misogyny in this society—and this is, I think, plainly untrue. (One limited issue after another has been proclaimed—by some feminists—to be "the" cause of patriarchy, a view that's ahistorical and much too simple. Something as long-standing as woman-hating can hardly be caused by a phenomenon so relatively new as pornography.) I've also heard—I may be wrong—that pornography is an issue which will enable us to reach right-wing women, an idea I find very self-destructive and dramatic rather than politically practical. The right is organized and wealthy, remember, and far more apt to use us that vice versa. And what good is it to reach women who disagree with all our other issues? Why the dickens are we not trying to reach the millions of women who are already inclined our way? I remember a c.r. group, the very young members of which spent an enormous amount of time and energy working with one battered woman, only to have her finally return to the man who battered her. Battering is, goodness knows, an emotionally gripping issue, but as Virginia Woolf says, a battle that wastes time and energy is as ill-advised as one that wastes lives.

And why, if what we're against is the glamorization of male violence, don't we direct our fire at Hollywood's ostensibly "realistic" depictions of life, like Apocalypse Now or A Clockwork Orange? Or those endless cop shows on TV? Or all those women so terrified on prime time TV because they are menaced by one man and need another man to protect them? Or the "family" shows which glorify traditional values (traditional ever since the 1950s) at the expense of our autonomy, humanness, and self-respect?
Surely this sort of stuff pollutes the cultural atmosphere far more than commercial fantasies made for masturbation. Movies and TV affect many more people (like women and children) that specialized, commercial, male fuck-books or films don't reach. More than that, the pornography I've seen—I have fifteen S & M books in my closet at the moment—seems to be aimed at specific sub-groups of male buyers. (The books advertised on the backs of the books I have come in clusters, i.e. monks-and-nuns books, Nazi-slave books, teenage-girls'-school books, and so on. The settings seem to matter, though they are sketchily limp; the sex scenes are just about identical from book to book.) As for the men's magazines, surely heterosexual men's desire to look at women's bodies is in itself perfectly acceptable. What's not acceptable is that the images sold to men are plastic and unreal, and that such sale takes place as part of a deeply sex-hating and woman-hating society. But to attack pornography seems to be going in the wrong direction. Sexual fantasies—to judge from women's—don't make much sense if taken at face value. Moreover, those fifteen books (chosen by a friend of mine for the horribleness of their covers) are much more concerned with fucking than they are with violence. It's not pornography but the mainstream culture which delivers violence as a substitute for sexual pleasure. I think the mainstream culture is much more dangerous than specialized-for-sex stuff, which has at least gotten to a sort of halfway position on the matter. It's true that if the Holocaust is of personal importance to you, and you read, say, Nazi Love-Slave, and lend it your own reality, you may be disgusted and frightened. That doesn't mean that the book is the cause of woman-hating or even an important cause. I find many of the things we take for granted much, much worse—like the sentimentality of "Little House on the Prairie," the TV tape of which I would very much enjoy burning with my own hands.
Several essays on pornography have stressed that the Nazis used it to flood occupied countries in order to corrupt the population thereof, but the fact that they did it doesn’t mean that it worked or that they knew what they were doing. They allowed no such stuff in Germany itself; instead, the kind of propaganda made for home consumption was very much like what we’re getting now from the right: For women, motherhood and “femininity” glorified, and for German youth, in general, the Virgin Mary as an ideal. For young men the ideal was the fervent love of comrades (some of these artifacts look very homosexual today) along with rigid sexual purity. The classic union of sexual repression with violence can’t occur in pornography, which has sexual expression as its raison d’etre; it’s, as far as my experience goes, in supposedly non-sexual material that the viciousness gets really bad. Nothing in Hard Knocks for Honey or The Sadistic Sisters of Saxony (honest, I’m not making up these titles) comes close in vividness, realism, or loving attention to detail of the commercial for Hitchcock’s TV program which was made up of a montage of different women screaming in terror. I would not mind too much re-reading the S & M titles (above) for the only hazard there is boredom; but I walked out of “A Clockwork Orange” a few years ago, shaking with anger, and would do so again.

That’s the sort of stuff we should be attacking.

I’ve tried to find an inspirational ending to this essay and can’t. The doubleness of sexuality will certainly continue. For years I hated myself for still having any affection for my father (who had become ill when I was about eight, and used to assuage his own fear by bullying my mother, and later, me). I thought I must be crazy to keep on feeling anything positive about someone who had so obviously hurt me. It took a long time to decide that I had not been defeated and that his misbehavior was far less humane than my continuing affection. When you live in a badly sexist
world and continue to have some positive feelings for those
who are oppressing you, it's all too easy to become horrified
at yourself and try to wipe away all positive emotion
towards the oppressors. Since that is not entirely possible,
many of us are left with an entirely understandable terror at
ever expressing these feelings—it feels like total defeat—and
a lot of energy must be taken up denying that these positive
feelings exist. I have even heard of a few rape victims who
were aroused sexually by the situation of rape—mind you,
this does not make rape less Godawful; on the contrary, to
my mind, such an impossible-to-deal-with contradiction
makes the whole business infinitely more horrible.

Well, I am talking only about my own experience; this is
the kind of thing I would say in a c.r. group. Double situa-
tions are not only painful but terribly confusing. If dancing
with my dentist was sex, I certainly didn't want any; and
yet—

Two other speculations; I don't think we should expect
gay men's experience with pornography to be anything like
ours. For many gay men, gay male pornography was the
first (and sometimes the only) validation of their sexuality
they could find. Nor—I'm convinced—is the issue of
pedophilia identical with what little girls experience with
adult men. For one thing, the major emphasis of this society
is that women are passive or childlike vis a vis men. Con-
tacts between adult males and boys are not harmonious
with the major emphases of the society. Boys are brought
up (once into adolescence) to be entitled to sexual feelings
and experimentation as girls are not, and are therefore prob-
ably more capable (certainly in adolescence) of refusing and
choosing sexually than girls are. (I'm not saying that this is
the whole truth about male teenagers/adult males relation-
ships, but that they are different from teenage female/adult
male ones.*)

*I'm not talking about children.
How to stop Uncle Max? I think an anecdote a friend of mine told me lately is instructive. She has a fourteen-year-old son whose friends have taken to hanging around her house, in part because she’s willing to give them straightforward information about sex and smoking and so on, and accepts the fact that they are sexually active without accepting dishonesty or coercion or manipulativeness as O.K. because “anything goes.” Recently one of the girls, at the age of twelve, decided to have intercourse (for the first time) with her thirteen-year-old boy friend. “She said that it hurt at first but after that she liked it a lot.” This same little girl (she’s under five feet tall) was recently grabbed from behind by a neighborhood rapist who’d already made attempts on two other pubescent girls; Lily (not her name) stamped backwards on the rapist’s instep, crunching it heavily, and then screamed as she ran away. What was striking to both me and my friend was what Lily did NOT do: She didn’t panic, wasn’t helpless, and above all (says my friend) was enraged but without feeling the slightest guilt. When something like that happened to me at the same age, I felt that I must have invited it or colluded with it, or liked it somehow. I suspect that the two incidents are related and the more open and autonomously chosen sexual pleasure a woman has, the better she’s equipped to deal with this culture’s substitution of violence for sexuality and the sexual repression that makes such very bad things possible.

Perhaps a word here about “sexual repression.” As far as I know, the only male authority who does not think that anything goes in sex is Wilhelm Reich—one of those clunky Germans who know only one thing (but one good thing) and kept repeating it ad infinitum. When I speak—as Reich does—about sexual “liberation” I do not mean (as he didn’t either) any kind of sexual outlet of any quality, and the only superiority of this to that being which one happens more often. What Reich (I think very perceptively, for a man)
understood was that when classic forms of sexual suppression—like the Nazis' in their own country—first begin to disappear, what you get is not freedom but a lot of very nasty behavior in which the pre-existing violence begins to be visible, along with some genuinely progressive behavior and events. I don't know what Reich's opinion of S & M would be since he never mentions it. What he does call "sadism" is what we would call simply cruelty and viciousness—like (he mentions) getting a woman drunk so that she can't resist when several men fuck her, a practice that used to be common in college fraternities when I went to school twenty years ago, and may be still.

"Sexual liberation" does NOT mean, when I use the phrase, joylessness, furtiveness, compulsion, threats, or the kind of behavior Phyllis Chesler notes in About Men in which she asked men whether they enjoyed sex with women and got the answer, "I like orgasm, of course; who wouldn't?" This kind of partial and miserable activity is a sign of repression, not freedom. We are surrounded today by plastic images of "sexuality," of beautiful models with painted faces and blow-dried hair cavorting in stylized situations of glee, by endless stupid chatter about "sexiness," and "freedom," of endless exhortations that we must be (hetero) sexual—but with the partner of the right sex and age and class and capped teeth and advertisers' clothing, and semi-naked bodies shown in titillating poses without any (God forbid) real nudity or vulnerability or real touching. Anyone who thinks this society is anywhere near "sexual liberation" should try sitting in a bus with her hand on a friend's genitals, and watch the faces around her. Unfortunately we are caught today between two lies, not one: The still powerful beliefs of the right and the "you must be sexual and any way is O.K." which involves the utter unreality of, say, Playboy pictures—are women born air-brushed?—and any damned thing at all, from the pleasures
of shared fantasy (which do promote intimacy) to the acting out of power fantasies against others.

And, just to make it even more confusing, sexual situations (as defined by the culture), and the contact of warm bodies does indeed rouse some minimal response, which explains the man in About Men who has to fantasize a baseball game to come to orgasm and me and my dentist. I had responded, after all, and not knowing that this minimal, reluctant response, very much mixed with loathing, was not “sex”—how could I? I had no genuinely free sexual experiences to use as a comparison—believed that this sort of contact was “sex”—and I had somehow colluded in the whole business.

The best cure for pornography is sex—I mean autonomously chosen activity, freely engaged in for the sake of real pleasure, intense, and unmistakably the real thing. The more we have experiences like this, the less we will be taken in by the confusions and lies and messes all around us.

Sexuality is a personal issue for everyone, and an extremely painful one for many of us. Let me stress again that the early c.r. groups dealt with the kind of things that made us feel strong and free. In fact, the strength and freedom came directly from expressing the things that made us feel hopeless and crazy.

Let us begin—please!