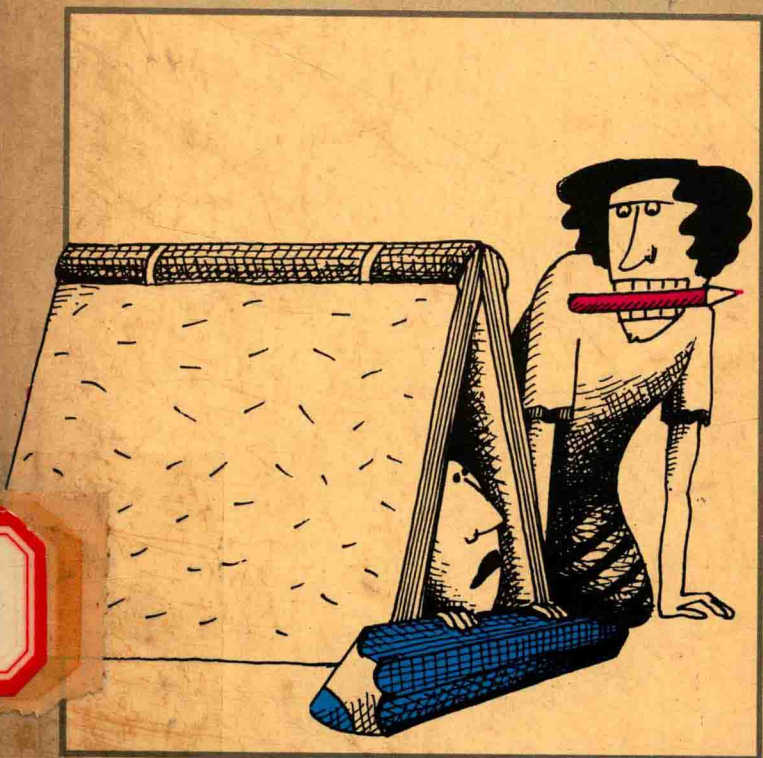


# INTRUDERS ON THE RIGHTS OF MEN

*Women's unpublished  
heritage*

Lynne Spender



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Heritage**



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**PANDORA PRESS**

Routledge & Kegan Paul  
London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley

*First published in 1983*

*by Pandora Press*

*(Routledge & Kegan Paul plc)*

*39 Store Street, London WC1E 7DD,*

*9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA,*

*296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park,*

*Melbourne, 3206, Australia, and*

*Broadway House, Newtown Road,*

*Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN*

*Photoset in 10 on 11½ Century Schoolbook by*

*Kelly Typesetting Limited*

*Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire,*

*and printed in Great Britain by*

*St Edmundsbury Press, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk*

*© Lynne Spender 1983*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

*Spender, Lynne.*

*Intruders on the rights of men.*

*Bibliography: p.*

*Includes index.*

*1. Feminism. 2. Publishers and publishing.*

*3. Power (Social sciences) I. Title.*

*HQ1154.S63 1983 305.4'2 82-22251*

*ISBN 0-86358-000-9*

# **INTRUDERS ON THE RIGHTS OF MEN**

**Lynne Spender**



**Lynne Spender** is an Australian feminist writer who has recently returned to Australia having lived for several years in North America where she researched and wrote this book. She combines the study of Law and the teaching of Women's Studies with the writing of a book about the myths and the reality of marriage for women.

**Cover Illustration** Christine Roche is a freelance cartoonist and illustrator. She is French Canadian and has been living and working in London since 1969.

Alas, a woman that attempts the pen  
Such an intruder on the rights of men.

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea  
(1661-1720)

# Acknowledgments



## Political

The information and the sensibility in this book are a direct product of the knowledge and awareness created by the current women's movement. Without the committed work of many other feminists and the networks that feminism has created, this book could not have been written and would certainly not have been published.

## Personal

I owe thanks to my family for their moral and financial support and their willingness to share child care – even when it involved travelling half way around the world. For the living example of justice and fair play that my parents have given, I am deeply appreciative. To my friend Jill, I owe many thanks for her unfailing help, both practical and emotional, and for her demonstration that sisterhood can indeed be powerful. To my biological sister Dale, I am forever grateful for her sense of humour, her sense of balance and her encouragement of these qualities in others. It is to acknowledge the stimulus, criticism and love that she has always offered, willingly and unconditionally, that this book has been written.

# Introduction



In literate societies, there is a close association between *the printed word* and the exercise of *power*. Because so many administrative and organizational tasks are carried out in print and because print forms the basic currency of education and literature, those who are involved in the *selection* of information and ideas to be published have a great deal of power to name the knowledge that will emerge in print. Similarly, those who control the distribution of the printed word have considerable power to decide who will have access to it; those who participate in its evaluation have the power to determine what status it will acquire. Ultimately, these powers to decide what knowledge will be made available and how it will appear and be received, constitute a great deal of power *over* society and its members.

When any group united by politics or ideology in a non-Western society has all these powers we are quick to cry 'propaganda' and to criticize their printed words as partial and biased. In contrast, we consider the printed words that emerge from our society to be the product of freedom of speech and expression. We tend to assume that publishing here takes place on a rational basis. We believe that the powers associated with the printed word are not in the hand of any one group and that no one doctrine is being promoted at the expense of others. We even tolerate the idea that 'freedom of

the press belongs to those who own it', because we regard the truths embodied in our published heritage as non-partisan and universal. We rarely see them in association with particular power structures.

Since the 1960s, however, and at various times over the last two hundred years, women have challenged the universality of those truths and have pointed out that the knowledge encoded in the printed word and in our published heritage is frequently not true for women. Such knowledge does not incorporate female experiences from a female point of view and does not value them. Instead, our published heritage consists of records of men's experiences and perceptions. Even the information about women is provided by men and, as Virginia Woolf tells us, by all sorts of men including those 'who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women' (Woolf, 1977a, p. 28). Women's own records of their lives are simply not included. Indeed, as the long and rich tradition of women's writing is being recovered, women are realizing that their perceptions, values and understandings have consistently been excluded from or edited out of the printed words that make up our cultural heritage. They have been relegated to what constitutes an *unpublished heritage* of women's words and truths.

Attempts to explain the disparity between our published and our unpublished heritage lead straight to the institution of publishing. There, behind the facade of rationality and integrity, the shaping of women's unpublished heritage can be traced. By promoting the myth of male supremacy through the devaluation of women and their words, and by promoting the myth of the neutrality of knowledge, publishers have managed to project men's truths as universal truths. Women's lives and truths have acquired only marginal status and significance.

Connections between the male-controlled publishing industry and women's exclusion from 'legitimate' cultural forms are more than mere social conventions. They have a political dimension in that they exemplify the arrangements whereby men appropriate power and use it to maintain their positions of dominance. Awareness of these connections



invites us to ask whether there is really much difference between a non-Western society where members of a certain political persuasion control the production and dissemination of knowledge and a Western society where the same tasks are carried out by white, educated men who have been reared in a patriarchal tradition of male supremacy. Should not their particular perspectives and their vested interests in promoting some truths and dismissing others be equally open to the criticism of being *political* in nature?

In theory the answer must be yes, but in practice, such criticism has never become a topic of concern partly because the men who control publishing also decided what will be named and circulated as a topic. Through a purposefully established system, men are given the privilege of choosing the topics and issues that will be considered of fundamental concern to society. In order to protect themselves and the *status quo*, they choose not to examine women's issues from the perspective of women.

Publishing is an institution controlled by men: as in other institutions controlled by men it constitutes a male dictatorship and as in other dictatorships, the power can be used to put out propaganda that is in the interests of the rulers. Alternative – or subversive views – can readily be suppressed.

So, at the moment, in spite of almost two decades of feminism during which time a tremendous amount of women's knowledge has been resurrected, as well as generated, this women's knowledge has been stigmatized and marginalized. It is women's knowledge, at best, the quaint ideas of the unrepresentative few, and at worst, the heresies of those bent on destruction. It is not knowledge which men have taken on as central, as the legitimate knowledge of half of humanity, with as many rights to significance and acceptance as their own. While women's knowledge challenges men's, it has not (as yet) deprived men of their power base: there have been no substantial changes.

Yet change is really what feminism is about. Feminists do have a notion of a society that can afford to seek diversity and where different 'truths' can be valued, rather than ranked and stratified. We do have a concept of a culture

where women exist on equal terms with men and where women's contributions are granted equal validity.

This book explores some of the changes that might help bring such a society into being. By considering data from the past and documenting evidence from women currently engaged in writing and publishing, it aims to deconstruct the myths and mystique associated with the publishing industry. By placing the relationship between *power* and *print* in a political context, the information in this book places women in a position to recognize some of the arrangements that have worked for so long against our movement towards autonomy and equality. Hopefully, it will also place women in a position where we will never again have to reconstruct our past before we can anticipate our future.

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## Chapter 1

# Gatekeeping



The values which a society holds and the institutions it creates are not an accident. They reflect the conscious and unconscious choices made by people in power and positions of authority. The way of life – and the quality of life – is directly or indirectly determined by the decisions which are made within the circles of the powerful.

There is nothing new about this understanding; be it nuclear weapons or the availability of creches, the disproportionate unemployment of blacks or the location of a new airport that is the explicit issue, there is widespread recognition that it is but a few who make the choices, even though it may be the many who feel the consequences. So it would be reassuring to know that those who enjoyed the privilege of decision-making were a 'representative' group, holding a range of values and priorities and able to appreciate the significance of their actions for all who are affected by them. Sleep would come easily at night if we were to know that the vast range of decisions which were being made – and which would impinge on our lives in myriad ways – were being undertaken in a fair and neutral manner, and embodied the needs and aspirations of all members of society.

But this is not the case. There is no reassurance. Since we have been keeping records we know that only half of

## 2 Gatekeeping

humanity (and a segment of that half) has had any influence in the decision-making circles. The only values and priorities that have been reflected are those of the male. In each generation a group of privileged men, on the basis of their own experience and with the endorsement of other men, has had the right to decree the social values. It is not just a matter of whether there will be peace or war, mines or conservation areas, football pitches or child-minding facilities, that has been decided by men, but the more subtle – and some would say more insidious – *scheme* of values which would have us believe that war, or mines, or football pitches are sound and sensible ways of organizing society. What is considered significant, sane and suitable at the most basic level in our ordering of experience, has been decreed – and built upon – for centuries by a small band of men who have found it easy to accept that their ways are the right ways.

From government to education, from science to religion, from medicine to the media, it has been men who have been in command and given the orders; they have made the policy decisions and put them into practice through the organizations and institutions which they, as the dominant group, control.

This means that our culture, which we have been encouraged to see as *human* culture, is nothing other than a product of the understanding and beliefs of the dominant group – men! Regardless of their position in a male-determined hierarchy, women have never contributed to the making of our society in equal numbers and on the same terms as men. Even if tomorrow women were to comprise half the politicians, or business executives, or priests or scientists, what we have to keep in mind is that they would be coming into a system which men have devised for themselves, in which the values and the rules of the dominant group are already decreed, and into which the 'newcomers' would have to fit. For women to contribute to our value system, our social ideology and view of the world, on the same terms as men, women would have to be free to decree at least half the rules . . . by which men would have to abide.

Because we have become aware of the extent to which women have been excluded from this process of forming our

values and beliefs, and because we are beginning to appreciate the significance of this male monopoly, we are currently witnessing a demand for women to be included in the circle of the decision makers . . . so that our society reflects the consciousness of both sexes. Yet we cannot confine the demand to the presence of women in *equal numbers*; if women are not *admitted on the same terms as men*, then men will be able to retain their dominance.

Our culture at the moment, far from representing the sum total of human experience, reflects the experience of men. What does not make sense to the dominant group therefore does not make sense; what is not a priority – or a problem – for men, is therefore not a priority or a problem. The 'social reality' which we inhabit, the view of the world into which we have all been initiated as members of society and which we are obliged to affirm, is one which takes as its standards, the standards of white, educated men. There are no 'alternative' standards which allow for the values and priorities of those who are not white, or male, for example; there is only one standard and those who display any departure from it are defined as 'not up to standard'. Our culture, ostensibly neutral and the outcome of human effort and consciousness, in reality embodies and encodes the values of the dominant group who have produced it:

What is there – spoken, sung, written, made emblematic in art – and treated as general, universal, unrelated to a particular position or a particular sex as its source and standpoint, is in fact partial, limited, located in a particular position and permeated by special interests and concerns. (Dorothy Smith, 1978; p. 283)

Not surprisingly there are many women who object to this arrangement. For over a decade (this time round) feminists have been setting out the implications – for both sexes – of a system of values and beliefs that promotes and applauds the interests of one half of humanity and denies and derides the interests of the other half. In doing so we have come to understand (as our foremothers did) that it is not a case of pointing out to men the error (and injustice) of their ways so that they can mend them, it is a case of depriving the

dominant group of their power base. Many men do not want to give it up.

We have not been excluded by accident. The institutions that men have established have frequently been *based* on our exclusion and designed to create sexual inequality. In the eighteenth century, for example, men excluded women from education and were then able to argue that because women were not educated they could make no worthwhile contribution to the culture. In the nineteenth century men excluded women from the political arena and were then able to argue that because women had no head for politics, they could play no part in running society. We can see in the past how the institutions which men had set up for themselves were used to reinforce and maintain women's subordination. What we tend to forget is that the same process is at work in the present.

In 1969 Kate Millett introduced into the language the term 'sexual politics' to refer to 'power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another' (p. 23). She did us the service of alerting us – yet again, for women have perceived this before (see Spender, 1982b) – to the *purposeful* nature of the arrangements in our society, where men have assumed power and control and have used it to keep women, as a group, without resources, and without access to both the public and private worlds that men have traditionally – and conveniently – enjoyed.

In 1973 Mary Daly raised the same issue in another way when she recognized the power that goes with the ability to 'name the world' – to decree what is real, what is reasonable, what is right. Women have not had access to that power. Men have been the 'producers' of the belief system and women the 'consumers'. Men's way of seeing themselves and the world has been the only commodity on sale; the raw material of women's lives has not been processed and is not therefore available for use.

It is not just that men's values are put forward, it is also that women's are discarded. And the longer men stay in power, and retain the right to determine what society sees as important, the longer women are 'outside' and are seen to be

displaying their 'unfitness for public office' . . . just as they did when they were outside education, and outside the political framework. When men decree what is significant and women disagree . . . then what women want is seen as insignificant and a sign that they are not to be taken seriously, not to be admitted to the circles of power. It is a nice interlocking – and supremely convenient – arrangement for men.

Fortunately, however, there are many women who won't accept this brand of 'logic' of the dominant group, and who refuse to believe that the values women hold are 'silly' no matter what men may say. Elizabeth Janeway (1980), Adrienne Rich (1979), Dorothy Smith (1978) and Dale Spender (1981a and b, 1982a and b) have followed Kate Millett and Mary Daly and are among the many who have insisted that the reason male experience is granted more significance and authority in our society has little to do with the *quality* of male experience but much to do with the dominant group's desire to value itself . . . and retain its power.

There have been numerous periods when women of the past have come together to forge their own meanings and understandings about male power, and the process has been revived over the last ten years as women have once more elaborated, refined and validated these insights in feminist networks and have extended their analysis of the establishment and maintenance of our male-dominated culture. One of the names that women have provided to describe the world from the position which women occupy is that of 'Gatekeeping'.

The 'gatekeepers' are the guardians of the culture. They are the ones who formulate the standards – and the justifications for those standards, the ones who pass judgment on what makes sense, what is credible. Gatekeepers are those, for example who can decree that the mind and body in our society are separate entities – regardless of the number of Indian mystics who suggest otherwise: they are the ones who can declare what constitutes a proper sexual relationship (in which nose-rubbing plays no part no matter how many members of the Eskimo or Maori community testify to its satisfactory nature, and in which the vaginal orgasm does



play a part, no matter how many women express their incomprehension). The guardians of the culture have very considerable powers – among them the power to declare as right and proper arrangements which suit them.

Generally, the theory of gatekeeping suggests that the people who hold decision-making positions in our society actually select the information and ideas that will be allowed to pass through the 'gates' and be incorporated into our culture. Specifically, the theory draws attention to the fact that our patriarchal society is purposefully arranged so that men fill the decision-making positions and become the keepers of the gates. On the basis of their experience and their understandings, men can allow entry to the information and ideas that they find appropriate and they can reject any material that they find unsuitable or unimportant. Gatekeeping thus provides men with a mechanism to promote their own needs and interests at the expense of all others. In doing so, it effectively ensures the continuation of a male-supremacist culture.

Undoubtedly, 'gatekeeping' is a term that arises out of women's experience of the world. Women are aware that we, as a group, are often kept from filling policy and decision-making positions and thus from acquiring the authority associated with them. 'Gatekeeping' provides us with a linguistic tool to name the techniques used to arrange our exclusion. We know that the social organization of our culture has evolved with male experience as the central reference point and that female experience has been excluded or eclipsed. We can see how men, already in positions of power, perceive other men as the best candidates for other positions of power, for within a male frame of reference, only male experience is valued. From this point we can understand how the authority granted to men becomes genuine authority because it is perpetually associated with men. Women do not have and cannot acquire authority in the same way. There is no need for men to set up committees and conspire personally to exclude women. The process of gatekeeping achieves the same effect in an impersonal way that allows men to dissociate themselves from any form of discrimination. At the same time, it works to reinforce the