



SEXUAL POLITICS



Kate
Millett

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KATE MILLETT



SPHERE BOOKS LIMITED

30/32 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8JL

First published in Great Britain in 1971 by Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd.

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First Sphere Books edition, 1971

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Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks

SEXUAL POLITICS

Kate Millett

Kate Millett is a sculptor who has exhibited in Tokyo and New York and has taught in literature and philosophy departments. She was born in Minnesota, studied at the University there and at Oxford. She lives in New York City with her husband, Fumio Yoshimura, the sculptor.

For Fumio Yoshimura

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ORVILLE G. BRIM, JR.

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JEAN GENET

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HENRY MILLER

Excerpts from *Sexus, The Rosy Crucifixion I* by Henry Miller, 1965. Published by Grove Press, Inc.

Excerpts from *Black Spring* by Henry Miller, 1963. Published by Grove Press, Inc.

PREFACE

Before the reader is shunted through the relatively uncharted, often even hypothetical territory which lies before him, it is perhaps only fair he be equipped with some general notion of the terrain. The first part of this essay is devoted to the proposition that sex has a frequently neglected political aspect. I have attempted to illustrate this first of all by giving attention to the role which concepts of power and domination play in some contemporary literary descriptions of sexual activity itself. These random examples are followed by a chapter analyzing the social relationship between the sexes from a theoretical standpoint. This second chapter, in my opinion the most important in the book and far and away the most difficult to write, attempts to formulate a systematic overview of patriarchy as a political institution. Much here; and throughout the book, is tentative, and in its zeal to present a consistent argument has omitted (although it need not preclude) the more familiar ambiguities and contradictions of our social arrangements.

The second section, chapters three and four, are largely historical, outlining the great transformation in the traditional relationship between the sexes which took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then giving an account of the climate of reaction which later set in, assuring the continuation of a modified patriarchal way of life, and frustrating the possibility of revolutionary social change in this area for some three decades. The later chapters of the book focus specifically upon the work of three

figures I take to be representative of this latter period, examining their responses to the prospect of radical changes in sexual politics and their participation in a mood of reaction against such an impulse. The final chapter, devoted to the writings of Jean Genet, is intended to present a contrast, first in approaching sexual hierarchy from the oblique angle of homosexual dominance order as Genet describes and exposes it in his novels, and secondly, through the emphasis given in his plays to the theme of sexual oppression and the necessity, in any radical program, for its eradication.

It has been my conviction that the adventure of literary criticism is not restricted to a dutiful round of adulation, but is capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes, or interprets, or even distorts. This essay, composed of equal parts of literary and cultural criticism, is something of an anomaly, a hybrid, possibly a new mutation altogether. I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced. Criticism which originates from literary history is too limited in scope to do this; criticism which originates in aesthetic considerations, "New Criticism," never wished to do so.

I have also found it reasonable to take an author's ideas seriously when, like the novelists covered in this study, they wish to be taken seriously or not at all. Where I have substantive quarrels with some of these ideas, I prefer to argue on those very grounds, rather than to take cover under the tricks of the trade and mask disagreement with "sympathetic readings" or the still more dishonest pretense that the artist is "without skill" or a "poor technician." Critics who disagree with Lawrence, for example, about any issue are fond of saying that his prose is awkward—a judgment purely subjective. It strikes me as better to make a radical investigation which can demonstrate why Lawrence's analysis of a situation is inadequate, or biased, or his influence pernicious, without ever needing to imply that he is less than a great and original artist, and in many respects a man of distinguished moral and intellectual integrity.

The ambitious, often rather overwhelming, undertaking this study became as I proceeded, could not have been accomplished without the guidance, the support, and the much-needed criticism of a number of people: I should like to thank George Stade, Theodore Solotaroff, Betty Prashker, Annette Baxter, Mary Mothersill, Lila Karp, Suzanne Shad-Somers, Catherine Stimpson, Richard Gustafson, Laurie Stone, Frances Kamm, and Sylvia Alexander for providing all of them. I am particularly grateful to Steven Marcus who gave the manuscript the most careful reading and could always find time and patience to insist rhetoric give way to reason.

—Kate Millett
New York, 1970

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I

SEXUAL POLITICS

ONE

Instances of Sexual Politics

I

I would ask her to prepare the bath for me. She would pretend to demur but she would do it just the same. One day, while I was seated in the tub soaping myself, I noticed that she had forgotten the towels. "Ida," I called, "bring me some towels!" She walked into the bathroom and handed me them. She had on a silk bathrobe and a pair of silk hose. As she stooped over the tub to put the towels on the rack her bathrobe slid open. I slid to my knees and buried my head in her muff. It happened so quickly that she didn't have time to rebel or even to pretend to rebel. In a moment I had her in the tub, stockings and all. I slipped the bathrobe off and threw it on the floor. I left the stockings on—it made her more lascivious looking, more the Cranach type. I lay back and pulled her on top of me. She was just like a bitch in heat, biting me all over, panting, gasping, wriggling like a worm on the hook. As we were drying ourselves, she bent over and began nibbling at my prick. I sat on the edge of the tub and she kneeled at my feet gobbling it. After a while I made her stand up, bend over; then I let her have it from the rear. She had a small juicy cunt, which fitted me like a glove. I bit the nape of her neck, the lobes of her ears, the sensitive spot on her shoulder, and as I pulled away I left the mark of my teeth on her beautiful white ass. Not a word spoken.¹

This colorful descriptive prose is taken from Henry Miller's celebrated *Sexus*, first published in Paris in the forties but outlawed from the sanitary shores

¹ Henry Miller, *Sexus* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 180.

of his native America until the Grove Press edition of 1965. Miller, alias Val, is recounting his seduction of Ida Verlaine, the wife of his friend Bill Woodruff. As an account of sexual passage, the excerpt has much in it of note beyond that merely biological activity which the narrator would call "fuck-ing." Indeed, it is just this other content which gives the representation of the incident its value and character.

First, one must consider the circumstances and the context of the scene. Val has just met Bill Woodruff outside a burlesque theater where Ida Verlaine is performing. In the rambling fashion of Miller's narrative, this meeting calls up the memory of the hero's sexual bouts with Ida ten years before, whereupon follow eleven pages of vivid re-enactment. First, there is Ida herself:

She was just exactly the way her name sounded—pretty, vain, theatrical, faithless, spoiled, pampered, petted. Beautiful as a Dresden doll, only she had raven tresses and a Javanese slant to her soul. If she had a soul at all! Lived entirely in the body, in her senses, her desires—and she directed the show, the body show, with her tyrannical little will which poor Woodruff translated as some monumental force of character. . . . Ida swallowed everything like a pythoness. She was heartless and insatiable.²

Woodruff himself is given out as a uxorious fool: "The more he did for her the less she cared for him. She was a monster from head to toe."³ The narrator claims to be utterly immune to Ida's power but is nonetheless subject to coldly speculative curiosity:

I just didn't give a fuck for her, as a person, though I often wondered what she might be like as a piece of fuck, so to speak. I wondered about it in a detached way, but somehow it got across to her, got under her skin.⁴

As a friend of the family, Val is entitled to spend the night at the Woodruff house, followed by breakfast in bed while husband Bill goes off to work. Val's initial tactic of extracting service from Ida is important to the events which follow:

She hated the thought of waiting on me in bed. She didn't do it for her husband and she couldn't see why she should do it for me. To take breakfast in bed was something I never did except at Woodruff's place. I did it expressly to annoy and humiliate her.⁵

In accord with one of the myths at the very heart of a Miller novel, the protagonist, who is always some version of the author himself, is sexually

² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*