

DEBATING SEXUAL CORRECTNESS



PORNOGRAPHY, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, DATE RAPE,

AND THE POLITICS OF SEXUAL EQUALITY

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for Megan

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Introduction: Feminism and the Culture of Sexuality

Adele M. Stan

If, up to this point, the 1990s bear any singular theme, that theme is sex and its place in American life. The decade that opened with a furor over a little buddy film called *Thelma and Louise* went on to give us the date-rape trial of William Kennedy Smith and the volatile public hearings on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the bench of the Supreme Court, at which the ladylike law professor Anita F. Hill made allegations of sexual harassment against him. Tailhook, the Spur Posse, and the Glen Ridge case have all become household phrases, and the lurid saga of John and Lorena Bobbitt, the tale of a man separated from his privates by his knife-wielding wife, will likely pass into national legend.

On a recent Sunday night, I listened to New York radio personality Vin Scelsa interview Eric Schaeffer, a young filmmaker whose movie, *My Life's in Turnaround*, addresses the complex subject of gender relations. "I mean, what do women want?" he asked Scelsa. "Do they want the penis . . . or do they want to cut it off? I don't know."

As if in answer to the young man's question, twenty-six-year-old bad girl singer-songwriter Liz Phair menaces a male lover in her song "Flower," threatening to do him like a dog and make him like it, promising, "I'll fuck you til your dick is blue." Young women may want the penis, it seems, but some want to both have and hurt it.

At the opposite extreme, we have the media uproar that ensued when a Penn State English professor removed a print of a nude female figure, Goya's "Naked Maja," from her classroom. The remarks elicited from her male students by the titillating masterpiece chilled the classroom climate, said Professor Nancy Stumhofer, making it difficult to teach.¹ Though pundits wildly misreported the story as "The Teacher Who Claimed She Was Harassed by a Painting," other cases have cropped up that border on the absurd, like those in Menlo Park, California, where the complaint of a Seventh-Day Adventist computer operator caused the removal of an art exhibit from a municipal building, and in Oglesby, Illinois, where a WPA mural of loinclothed Native American men was taken down at the behest of a male janitor.

Though sexual ambivalence and fury are nothing new in the land of the free, lately they seem to have reached a fever pitch. America's Puritan roots are never far from the surface, leaving us especially susceptible to a certain dualism, most perfectly illustrated, perhaps, by the lusty reading given a section of the sexually explicit book *The Exorcist*—the part about a pubic hair on a Coke can by Orrin Hatch—the very pious senator from the very Mormon state of Utah, at the Clarence Thomas hearings. Indeed, the recent and long-overdue airing of women's sexual grievances against men has provided the most proper of Americans with a publicly acceptable voyeurism, a sort of folk-medicine antidote to the eighties' backlash against the sexual revolution of the sixties, and the pall that AIDS has cast over sexual freedom.

Our current conundrum over sex and what we want from it stems, in part, from the success of the feminist movement over the last twenty years, ushering in changes in the traditional sexual paradigm. The long-upheld order of man-on-top has been upended, leaving society disoriented, without a proven blueprint for the future. Leaders on both sides of the political scale lament over a nation morally adrift, and many claim feminism to be the cause. On the right, the women's movement is seen as the agent of sexual deviance for its alleged destruction of the nuclear family and its support of gay rights. Among liberals, feminists are increasingly cast as neo-

Victorians who seek to protect women from sexual reality and shower them with privileges of moral purity.

A year or so ago, a lot of dust was kicked up by a young upstart named Katie Roiphe, whose book *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* claimed that "rape-crisis feminists" were poisoning the sexual atmosphere on college campuses by casting all men as potential rapists and encouraging young women to view sexual experiences that were merely unpleasant as rape.² Meanwhile, on the campus of the very liberal Antioch College, a new policy of sexual consent was instituted whereby students (read men) are expected to ask permission of their partners prior to each step of any sexual encounter; a general consent to have sex will not suffice: "May I kiss you?" must be followed by "May I touch your ____?" and on and on. Students who fail to comply with the policy face possible expulsion. All this prompted *Newsweek* to scream on a 1993 cover, SEXUAL CORRECTNESS: HAS IT GONE TOO FAR?

Before we attempt to answer that question, it would be instructive to look at how we got to this place. There once was a time in America when nearly every act of sexual bullying and assault conducted by men against women was tolerated in our society. Acts such as rape, which were always against the law, were made permissible by an onerous burden of proof placed upon the victim and the cultural censure of the accuser. Women felt powerless to halt the sexual aggression of a man, never mind call him to account for his sins. The time of which I write is not some distant past; this is how it was when I came of age, and I remain, however briefly, on the shy side of forty.

When the modern women's movement formed in the late 1960s, feminists sought to liberate women not only from the external oppression heaped upon them in their prescribed roles as mothers and helpmeets, but also from the self-censoring voice within that so often limited women's perceptions of themselves. The flip side of the coin that licensed men to impose their sexual will on women was the stifling of female sexuality to the point where many women were ignorant of their own anatomy, not even knowing where their ticket

to orgasm, the clitoris, was located. Feminists became agents of female sexual liberation, asserting a woman's right to sexual pleasure in its myriad forms, both hetero- and homosexual, combating the notion that a woman who liked sex was somehow less than moral.³ In their most experimental forms, consciousness-raising meetings sometimes included the physical examination by participants of their own anatomy, aided by disposable specula and a mirror. Author Betty Dodson taught women how to masturbate and find their cervixes, while more mainstream women's magazines had us counting climaxes as we sought to fulfill our newly discovered multiorgasmic potential.

But while talk of G-spots and the Big O abounded, assault and harassment continued unabated, and the so-called sexual revolution heaped a double whammy on the old double standard. In the old days, it was assumed that nice girls said no while bad girls said yes; men were free to have sex (as long as it was with women) as they pleased with minimal risk to their reputations. But by the 1960s, with the advent of the Pill, every woman was presumed to want sex with any long-haired man who set himself upon her; to say no was to be "uptight," "unhip," "unliberated," and, most probably, frigid—while saying yes was the groovy, freedom-loving thing to do. Nevertheless you'd most likely be branded "loose" and there for the taking by any number of men once you did the deed.⁴ It's important to remember that the sexual revolution was experienced by women who were not raised to be feminists but, rather, a generation that was reared to please men.

So, at the same time that feminists sought to unleash female sexuality, they also called attention to the perils that the sexual construct as we knew it held for women. From the first, a war on degrading sexual imagery was declared, heralded by Gloria Steinem's undercover stint as a Playboy Bunny for *Show* magazine.⁵ In the year that fell between the Summer of Love and the Dionysian spectacle that was Woodstock, a group of feminists led by Robin Morgan disrupted the Miss America Pageant with a gutsy protest.⁶ Sexual liberation and the war on sexist imagery formed a loosely woven double helix for most in the movement: to be a free agent of one's

own sexuality, one's depiction as a whole being, not a mere object, was imperative. Even more pressing was a need to lift the veil of glamor from the rape myth—to declare that women were *not* lusting for abuse, as pornography often showed them to be. The early “women’s-libbers” were hardly against sex; they simply sought to seize control of female sexuality from the hands of men.

In 1970 the war on pornography began with a feminist sit-in at the Grove Press, from which a young editor named Robin Morgan, already known as a feminist activist, had just been fired, for apparently political reasons. Although Grove was the darling publishing house of the left, it trafficked in pornographic material as well. Laura Lederer, founding member of San Francisco’s Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), writes that the action “was a manifestation of the growing split between the male radical movement and feminists.”⁷ Grove’s owner, Barney Rossett, called in the police, who arrested the women and threw them in jail for the night where, for their antipornography action, they were strip-searched at the hands of the New York City Police Department.⁸

The focus on female sexuality was only one facet of the women’s movement, of course. A major thrust of feminism was to liberate middle-class women from the cloister of the home and to bring economic parity to the workplace. By the mid-seventies, droves of suburban women re-entered the workforce, or enrolled in college, or both. Once back in the world with its attendant dangers, a new awareness formed of the threats nearly all women faced to their physical autonomy, threats that were long endured by single and working-class women in silence.

In 1975 Susan Brownmiller’s landmark book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, blew the lid off one of society’s dirtiest little secrets—the prevalence of sexual assault against women, and the sociological dynamics that perpetuate it. What made Brownmiller’s book particularly controversial was her decision to include coerced sex within the construct of rape, though she stated forthrightly that verbal sexual coercion “will remain a problem beyond any possible solution of criminal justice.” Brownmiller wrote: “It

would be deceitful to claim that the murky gray area of male sexual aggression and female passivity and submission can ever be made amenable to legal divination—nor should it be, in the final analysis.”⁹

Today Brownmiller’s work is often misrepresented by her detractors as a polemic for so-called victim feminism, when in fact she calls upon women to strengthen both their psyches and bodies for the battle against victimization. This single line from her introduction is oft repeated to characterize her complex, groundbreaking analysis: “[Rape] is nothing more or less than a process of intimidation by which *all men keep all women* in a state of fear [italics hers].”¹⁰ Though perhaps a tad hyperbolic, this statement was less so in 1975, when it first appeared, a time when virtually no men spoke out against the sexual assault of women, and even those without malicious intent benefited from the climate of fear in which women lived.

The year after *Against Our Will* appeared on the bookshelves, a related issue, sexual harassment, cropped up in the most mainstream of venues, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. There *Ms.* editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin wrote a regular column that served a growing segment of the magazine’s readership under the heading “The Working Woman.” When Pogrebin gave name to the problem of harassment in the workplace, the magazine was flooded with letters that basically all told the same story—the story of women subjected to all manner of sexual intimidation and demands by employers and co-workers.¹¹

Though the campaigns against sexist imagery and sexual violence and intimidation had always overlapped, in the year that followed the Pogrebin article, they became inextricably wed in *Going too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* by Robin Morgan. In her angry, literate tome Morgan took the nature of consent one step beyond Brownmiller, arguing that intercourse is rape unless it is “initiated by the woman out of her own genuine affection and desire.”¹² Several pages later, she offered the sentence that remains the mantra of the antipornography movement today: “Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice.”¹³