

**THE FEMINIST  
CLASSIC**

**KATE MILLETT'S**

**SEXUAL  
POLITICS**



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# **SEXUAL POLITICS**

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**Kate Millett**

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### ORVILLE G. BRIM, JR.

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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, undertak-

ing 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 Solataroff, 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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\* Lucinda Cisler's annotated *Women: a Bibliography* was an invaluable aid.



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I

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# **SEXUAL POLITICS**





## ONE

### Instances of Sexual Politics

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#### 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 of his na-

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