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3. *Beauty and the Beast I:*

Sex and Violence

> We found ourselves continually returning to the centrality of male sexuality as an issue, its form and function in the social control of women.
>
> Lal Coveney et al, Patriarchy Study Group[1]

> If 'all men' are seriously to be taken as a political category, about the only thing they actually have in common is their penises. The biological fact of maleness thus gets attached to the social fact of power, not by historical analysis but by definition. Conversely, the biological fact of femaleness becomes the central way of defining the experience of women.
>
> R.W. Connell[2]

> Only now, from a different time and place in the feminist debate over sexuality, does that apparently unanimous agreement among young educated women that sexual pleasure, however achieved, was an unproblematic desire seem curious.
>
> Cora Kaplan[3]

The greater emphasis on the separate experiences of women and men during the late seventies derived above all from a re-analysis of sexuality. The identification of sexuality as 'the primary social sphere of male power'[4] was to have far-reaching, and disastrous, effects on the feminist analysis of heterosexuality, lesbianism and the possibilities for combating power relations between men and women. It was disastrous in my view, because it encouraged 'all women' to identify themselves as the victims of 'all men'. It therefore rejected any serious attempt to examine the complexities and confusion of our experiences as women and men. It underestimated the significance of the many factors which cut across women's experience simply as women. Above all, it submerged the earlier feminist assertion that the collective

power of women could help transform all practices of domination, including the sexual.

The pull of the sexual is magnetic. All the more so when the meaning of 'sex' is puzzling, ambiguous and obscure. Is sex primarily some need for communication, for a relationship, a state of passion or arousal, an expression of buried desire, or the ultimate physical pleasure to be sought after and dreamed of? The need for affection, support, communication, understanding, as well as nagging feelings of emptiness, futility, hostility and neglect, all attach themselves most readily to thoughts of sex in our society. Indeed so many human desires are collapsed into sex that it becomes almost inevitable that our thoughts should continually return to it.

Sex has been placed at the centre of our lives. It appears to define who we are as individuals. Havelock Ellis summed it up at the start of the twentieth century, 'There is considerable truth in the dictum: "A man is what his sex is." '[5] Michel Foucault has argued that from the beginning of the eighteenth century 'sex' became 'the truth' of our lives.[6] But it is a truth which he saw as historically constructed by society. I believe he is right to suggest that 'sex' has only an illusory unity, being the product of all the discourses used to describe the body. It is this complexity of 'the sexual', combined with the endless discussion of sex which makes it such a powerful force in our lives. Whether provoking fear and danger, aching despair, unfathomable longing, the search for new pleasures or the need for the comfort of the familiar, the discussion of sex has a remarkable capacity to threaten our tranquillity.

We see sex as the most 'natural' and private part of our lives. But the power of the cultural images which define it and the variety of legal, medical and welfare practices which regulate it, mean that our sexual lives are always intricately shaped by the society we live in. Sex, as it is socially defined and controlled, is also, without doubt, tied in with all the social practices and institutions confirming men in their power over women.

It is not surprising, then, that the issue of sexuality has so violently divided the feminist movement. Divisions also appeared in the first wave of organised feminism at the turn of this century. And it has seemed to feminists, both past and present, that women do share a common awareness of men's power and

control over women's sexuality – that sex is indeed the site of women's difference from men. Is sex not, in the intimate last instance, the solid base from which men's social control over women is built?

In most societies, although in very different ways, a host of sanctions and constraints – legal, social and ideological – surrounds every aspect of women's sexuality. From bottom-pinching to coercive sex, men's greater power in the world is manifested in, and often mediated through, sexual encounters. It is manifested, and, in the relentless inescapable ideology and iconography of the erotic, endlessly celebrated. The searching stare, the crushing lips, the strong embrace, the final, forceful, hard and thrusting penis – ever erect, ever active – are women's and men's inevitable language and imagery of 'male' sexuality. In stark contrast, the provocatively posed but constructed passivity of the female body, used in our society to promote the sale of every possible commodity from BMWs to drainpipes, is offered up, to be endlessly contemplated and endlessly consumed. For the truth of our lives in the West is also the truth of a capitalist market, and how it has been able to harness sexuality for its own ends, creating and stimulating new 'needs' and desires. The impact of feminism and other forces of change over the last ten years has thrown up new representations of the female body, like the sexually knowing virgin *and* whore, victim *and* aggressor, found in the pop star Madonna's image.[7] But it is still the *female* body which remains the primary sex object for commercial exploitation. There could not, it would seem, fail to be a connection between the traditional imagery of male and female sexuality, and the reality of men's control and dominance in the world.

But what has fashioned the image, and what really is the connection? Is it, as is still conventionally assumed, some overpowering all-conquering male instinct to be sexually aggressive and assertive? Or is it (if we reject the biological as never alone determining human action) some need for power somehow restricted to men? Could men consciously and wilfully control women through the threat of sexual violence, while concealing their desire for power over women through their perennial propaganda for the joys of heterosexual sex? Many feminists today seem to think so: 'women's sexual "desire" for

the penis has been inflicted on us by a male dominated culture', the Lesbians Against Pornography Group write.[8] And, more lyrically and persuasively, Adrienne Rich argues the same thing when she suggests, 'for women, heterosexuality may not be "preference" at all but something that has been composed, managed, organised, propagandised, and maintained by force.'[9] Men, it is true, are physically stronger than women, but how does something so vulnerable and fragile as men's *genital* equipment (for it is well known that a tiny tweak of the testes or a knee to a man's groin never fails to produce shrieks of pain) transform itself into something which appears as a potential weapon, an instrument to dominate and control, the very basis of men's power? How do men control women through sex? The answer, I would argue, is far from obvious.

The Route to 'Sexual Liberation'

At least on the surface, women's experience of sexuality changed dramatically in this century. And yet, seen from the aspect of feminist discontent, the more it changes, the more it stays the same. A central theme of the suffragette campaign in the early stages of this century was the urgent need to change sexual relations between men and women. Christabel Pankhurst's passionate call for sexual purity in men, alongside votes for women, was a call to reform men in line with the Victorian ideal of the sexual purity and spirituality of the bourgeois woman. It was echoed by most, though not all, feminists of her day. A small group of feminist sexual radicals in the early twentieth century, like the fiery young Rebecca West and the editors of *The Freewoman*, did seek greater sexual freedom for everybody, and rejected the traditional stereotypes surrounding men and women.[10] But the overwhelming majority of suffragettes stressed the asexuality and moral superiority of women. As feminist historian Catherine Hall has argued, this reflected the general portrayal of the bourgeois woman developed in the nineteenth century: 'woman's project was to be moral, and to save men from immorality.'[11]

But the cry for sexual purity in those days was not surprising when it seemed to offer the best protection for married women

against continuous and debilitating pregnancies and infection from venereal disease. It was also a protection against that grim counterpart to the Victorian 'moral home' and 'perfect wife', the even harsher fate awaiting the unfortunate unmarried and pregnant woman – frequently forced into prostitution through social disgrace and economic destitution. Unwanted pregnancy, syphilis and congenital disease in children were the apparent and constant confirmation that the sexuality of men involved the brutalisation of women. Sex, as Victorian morality proclaimed, was a Sin.

Today, in contrast, the physical dangers of pregnancy and disease do not loom so large as 'the inevitable consequences of sin' in women's experience of sex with men. There are those who still want retribution for a woman's sexual life outside marriage, and retribution for any unorthodox sexuality. Their opposition to sex education for the young and their attempts to halt greater public awareness of the varieties of sexual practice, have served to promote ignorance and fear of sex. In the 1980s a more conservative climate gives space to those who would confine sexuality within the traditional male-dominated and authoritarian family. The delayed medical response in seeking a cure for, or suggesting how to prevent AIDS, a disease still primarily affecting men through homosexual encounters in this country, is part of this punitive and regressive attitude to unorthodox sexual practices. And the increasing cervical cancer rates in women have served the cause of the sexual conservatives. There are persisting inadequacies in modern contraception (still seen as primarily women's responsibility, whatever the dangers to our health and sexual spontaneity) which mean that heterosexuality is not free from physical problems, especially for younger and sexually inexperienced women. But, despite the more visible and vocal moral right of the eighties, the dominant trend throughout the twentieth century has been to make a separation between sexual pleasure and conception, and between sex and disease. In parallel, despite inevitable reactions, there has been an insistent reversal of Victorian attitudes towards women's sexuality, and towards sexuality in general. Sex, in the contemporary Western metropolis, is no longer a Sin.

The Western sexual reform movements of the twentieth century, together with the steady growth of a literature and

practice of marriage counselling, took as their starting point an emphasis on the joys of, and indeed necessity for, sexual satisfaction for both men and women within marriage; sex free from fears of conception. Women's satisfaction was, to be sure, described as uniquely responsive to men's competent, skilled and if necessary virtuoso performance. In no sense was it seen as self-initiating or self-directed; nonetheless, it was seen as essential for true marital harmony or 'marital bliss' as Marie Stopes, Van de Velde and others wrote in the 1920s.[12] This attitude had the repressive consequence of a growing scorn for the unmarried woman and the need for a 'cure' for the supposedly 'frigid' woman. But the public encouragement of women's sexual pleasure within marriage always held the threat that it might break free from its marital enclosure into pre-marital or extra-marital sexual encounters. The floodgates of women's eroticism were being dangerously weakened.

There was a fear of women's sexuality and of a decline in the position of men amongst some of those who argued for sexual reform. It is reflected, for example, in the writing of D.H. Lawrence, with his anxiety that women of a sexually independent nature, like Lady Chatterley, were in danger of losing their 'femininity' – their tenderness and receptivity. It was not until the 1960s that women's sexuality otuside marriage became publicly acceptable. The new wave of egalitarianism and permissiveness accompanying the more economically secure sixties ushered in a variety of new sexual reforms, and transformed the lives of women. The abortion reform bill of the late sixties, alongside the marketing of the oral contraceptive pill for women over sixteen, made women's sexual engagements with men an altogether less risky pursuit. This remains so today, despite important regional differences in availability of abortion facilities and fears about the effects of 'the pill'.

It was the combination of 'sexual liberation' and the student protest movements of the sixties which provided the seeds from which the women's liberation movement was to flower at the close of the decade – both affirming and rejecting much that had given rise to it. The predominantly young women who became feminists in the late sixties and early seventies mostly emerged into feminism from the anti-imperialist, anti-authoritarian and co-operative 'counter culture' which had flourished particularly

between 1967 and 1972.[13] Sexual liberation was fundamental to its politics. Capitalism, in counter cultural ideology, needed sexually repressed people for the realisation of its life-negating, endlessly acquisitive, and destructive goals. It required self-restraint and compulsive work: both at odds, it was thought, with any liberated or spontaneous sexual expression.

Recalling the Sixties

In an affirmation of the sexual radicalism of the sixties, feminists in the early seventies took their own search for sexual pleasure very seriously. If we could not quite match the solemnity and zeal of Masters and Johnson as they meticulously recorded and advised upon women's route to orgasm, we were at least impressed by their deference to the clitoris, and their damning dismissal of much of men's customary sexual practice. If women had not been enjoying their sexual experience with men, not having their share of orgasms, it became easier to reject what we had usually been led by men to see as our own problem – and one we were unable to discuss with men. Feminists soon began to suggest that it was necessary for women to explore and express their real sexual feelings, needs and desires, and, if engaging with men, to begin to re-educate men as well. Sexual satisfaction, feminists argued in these early days, could give women greater confidence in themselves and more power in the world – an idea lifted directly from the raunchy Reichian sixties, when the first English edition of *The Function of the Orgasm* became a bestseller.

There has been some considerable feminist rewriting of women's engagement with the sexual radicalism of the sixties. It has become a new orthodoxy, strangely enough of radicals and conservatives alike, that women eagerly participated only briefly in what Beatrix Campbell has referred to as 'men's clamour for sex': that we were quickly disillusioned and disappointed.[14] But that was not my own experience, nor that of other women recording those times for us. The reality was, as usual, more ambiguous. We have not only Germaine Greer's ballsy bragging of her own predatory passions and carnal conquests in *The Female Eunuch*, which is critical of other women who cannot share her own desire to 'embrace' the penis, but other reflections

on those times.[15] The New York writer and feminist, Ellen Willis, reflecting on her own writing on Bob Dylan in 1968, recalls how she identified with men's promiscuous sexual exploits and shared their anti-possessiveness: 'I understood men's needs to go on the road because I was, spiritually speaking, on the road myself. That, at least, was my fantasy; the realities of my life were somewhat more ambiguous.'[16] Her compatriot, Deirdre English, has also discussed the ambiguities of those days: 'The sexism was there, but women were actually having more sexual experience of different kinds and enjoying it.'[17]

It was my own experience in the sixties, and that of most of my women friends, that we greatly enjoyed being able to live openly in sexual relations with men, and also enjoyed the more or less frequent forays we chose to make outside our central relationships at any one time. I was then involved with the Sydney libertarian 'push', a small but influential radical bohemian social and political movement which flourished in Sydney, Australia, in the late fifties and early sixties. We were passionately anti-authoritarian anarchists committed to a philosophy of 'free love' and 'permanent protest'. A group of women from the 'push' recorded their experiences of those days for the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1982.[18] Recalling the very early days in the fifties, Judy Smith pointed out 'Our battles then really were breaking down sexual barriers: other battles came later.' But, she added, 'I enjoyed it, because the alternative in most societies was so dreadful; it was the push or suburbia.' Rosanne Bonney, reflecting on her life in the push in the early sixties, also concludes, 'I don't think I share what is the fashionable contemporay feminist view of what men did to me ... indeed I think I benefited greatly from it.' The general feeling all the women interviewed expressed was that they had enjoyed taking responsibility for themselves and the sexual and intellectual freedom this had meant.

It was rather less enjoyable, I would now add, once a woman decided to have a child or children, when the philosophy of individual responsibility and the pursuit of personal pleasure were to prove disastrously unsupportive and rejecting for many women. But certainly I look back with no flicker of regret, except occasionally at its passing, to those years in the 1960s when I rarely slept alone and devoted much of my leisure time to

bedding my favourite man of the moment. However strange it now seems to recall, it was not usually the men who initiated these erotic encounters. Sexual coercion is not what was happening amongst that little band of sexual radicals (even though Australian women have been described as 'the doormats of the Western world'). Like Mary Ingham[19] recalling those times in Britain, I suspect our sexual conquests – for that is how we saw them – were most satisfying for the social status they conferred on us rather than the physical pleasure they provided (seducing one's professor was usually the most boring experience of all, I remember, and not to be repeated). But some women did start to feel more sexually relaxed and confident in those years. Indeed, as I have been assured by many feminists of my own age, it was quite frequently our desire for new sexual experiences coming up against the unexamined double standards of men, and especially men's inability to cope with their own sexual jealousy, that led women into women's liberation.[20]

I think we can assume from women's recollections of the sixties that at least some were enjoying sex with men. Many more were probably more ambivalently enjoying sex with men, though unable to discuss its attendant frustrations. Some, no doubt, found little or no satisfaction in their sexual encounters with men. These differences were to feed later conflicts between women as ambivalence over heterosexuality deepened, and guilt-tripping of women who enjoyed sex with men strengthened. Nevertheless, however real or illusory the joys of sex with men, all feminists in the early 1970s were rejecting, and rejecting with anger, other practices which had been celebrated in the name of 'sexual liberation'.

In the late sixties a harder and more aggressive male radicalism had replaced the (superficially at least) softer focus of earlier years. Large numbers of feminists were soon to put an end to the male-centred, cock-crowing soft porn which had festooned much of the underground press in the sixties and early seventies, with its tits, bums, gang bangs and macho bravado. We exposed this as an expression of men's contemptuous and aggressive objectification of women. At the office of the radical socialist magazine *Black Dwarf*, Sheila Rowbotham, back in 1968, had been provoked to pin up the following poem: 'Let us put pin-ups in Black Dwarf/Let us wank into Revolution ... Let us stick

cunts/On our projecting egos/Calling this comradeship/And the end of exploitation ...'[21] And other underground magazines, like *Oz*, were seen as serving more to underline than to undermine society's general oppression of women, with certain added new twists. Young women (the younger the better) were depicted as little other than the sexual servicers of men; yet, like men, they were expected to equate fucking with their own liberation. Women with children could be eulogised as earth mothers but were expected to make no financial demands on men, and even less to expect men to take turns with the mop. Women in general were seen as providing emotional warmth and support but could expect no commitment or security from men. This could be a mugs' game for women, as Janis Joplin's self-flagellating, sobbing, throbbing, throaty wails warned us.

When Robin Morgan thundered forth her farewells to the sexist ignorance and arrogance of male radicals in 1970 and with other women took over the New York underground paper *RAT*, the wind that cooled the cocky confidence of many an old rebel fanned the flame of collective passion for many a new feminist. By the end of 1971, women working in the underground press in London had begun to meet together, which led within six months to the production of *Spare Rib*. Women's sexuality was to be reclaimed for women. Or so it seemed.

Women's Liberation and the Search for Sexual Pleasure

The first problem with sexuality, as feminists saw things back then, was that it was 'male-defined'. Our conception of the sexual act itself was, literally, the moment of penile penetration of the vagina. But, as Anne Koedt and a host of other pamphleteers soon proclaimed, this may, but very often may not, be the source of sexual arousal in women. Pointing out that the clitoris and not the vagina was 'the centre of sexual pleasure' for women, Koedt argued:

> We must begin to demand that if certain sexual positions now defined as 'standard' are not mutually conducive to orgasm, they no longer be defined as standard. New techniques must be used

> or devised which transform this particular aspect of our current sexual exploration.[22]

Women, it was felt, had been kept in the dark about their own sexuality, and in the dark they could not assert their own sexual needs. It was also clear that the language of sex, of fucking, always assigned activity and control to men, and passivity and surrender to women. It therefore served to symbolise the power relation between men and women in the world. It was the purest form of sexist imagery: dominant male, submissive female. The task for women in the women's liberation movement, Pat Whiting wrote in 1972, was 'to "decondition" men, to rid ourselves of the double standard and to establish a more realistic image of female sexuality than that offered by the male society.'[23]

Reappraisal of the sources of women's sexual pleasure and rejection of the double standard which disparaged or denied sexual assertiveness in women while celebrating it in men, was at the heart of the feminist critique of standard heterosexual practice in the early seventies. Wedded to this critique was the belief from the sixties that there was a connection between suppressed sexuality and social powerlessness. The Women's Liberation Workshop paper *Shrew*, in December 1972, carried the bold banner headline THE SUPPRESSED POWER OF FEMALE SEXUALITY. It began:

> Women have a capacity for sexuality far in excess of that of men. But thousands of years of patriarchal conditioning has robbed us of our sexual potential and deceived us about the true nature of our sexuality.

And it concluded:

> A woman who is directly in touch with her own forceful sexual capacities can no longer tolerate being told that she is inherently passive, essentially masochistic, and that she will only find true fulfilment in submission to men. To such a woman these ideas would be absurd ... Having finally come to realise the reality of her own power, she would never again relinquish it.[24]

Or, as Beatrix Campbell argued the following year:

> Women's sexual passivity and objectification undermines their functioning as autonomous individuals ... Acknowledgement of

> lust, acceptance of so-called promiscuity must be recognised as potentially inevitable stages in women's escape from sexual conformity.

More optimistically still, she concluded:

> The intervention of women in determining how sexuality is expressed need not simply end in evolving 'new response patterns', for this can just as easily end in exchanging one mechanical blueprint for another. The potency of women's intervention in the sexual arena lies in the possibilities of shedding the whole mythology of masculinity and femininity.[25]

The *Shrew* issue on sexuality had carried as its special Christmas treat 'PRICK: The Magazine for the Randy Woman' featuring gigantic male nudes, RAM dildos and RAPIER razor blades, thus mocking pervasive male sexual fantasies, but with a type of confident ridicule which would soon disappear altogether from feminist writing – to be replaced by pure rage. Such mockery of men's sexual obsessions also appeared in early issues of *Spare Rib*.

The second aspect of feminist analysis of sexuality in the early seventies stressed the significance of women's historic lack of control over their own fertility. This made sex with men a potential danger and problem for women, and was seen as the central mechanism through which men gained power and control over women. More basic than the extent to which men had defined existing ideas of sexuality were the ideas and arrangements surrounding reproduction and childcare. These placed women's fertility, and ultimately, therefore, women's lives, in men's hands.

Women could not, with any level of social acceptance and support, choose to give birth to a child except within marriage and the family, which legally, economically and socially, established men's power and authority over women. Equally, women who were sexually active with men could not choose *not* to give birth to a child with any confidence or security. Historically women had been denied access to adequate contraception; and were still, if accidentally pregnant, denied the right (usually by male authorities) to humane or unproblematically available abortion facilities. This analysis made free contraception and abortion on demand key issues for women's liberation in its early days, the bottom line for women

controlling their own destiny. Rosalind Delmar wrote in 1972, 'Today, the right to free contraception and abortion on demand is inscribed on the banners of every women's movement.'[26] And in these early days of hope, all the feminist campaigns over sexuality, fertility and childcare seemed to hold the promise of a brand new future for women. As Monica Sjoo summed it up,

> For women to be able to control their fertility questions the functions of the father-centred family and women's past within it as a source of unpaid labour – and so ultimately it questions the entire structure of the society we live in.[27]

While women's rights to free contraception and abortion became perhaps *the* symbols of women's liberation in its early days – and the demand which many men on the left and in trade unions came to support – it was always connected with wider campaigns concerning women's health, sexuality and issues of childbirth and childcare. By the mid seventies women's centres were being opened in almost every major city of Britain. Often the most active groups in the centres were women's health groups, which, along with promoting self-examination and self-help for women, were to expose the chilling inadequacies of the obstetric and gynaecological care women were receiving. These groups were in the forefront of opposition to the way in which women were denied active control over the process of childbirth and were frequently subjected to degrading and humiliating experiences in the hands of authoritarian, mostly male, doctors. Health care in general was seen as a crucial political issue. These women's health groups prefigured much of the current preoccupation with more holistic approaches to health and the proliferation of acupuncture, naturopathy and keep fit classes, all stressing the connections between physical, psychological, social and political factors. With their emphasis on self-help and alternative medicine, many of these initiatives necessarily involved working outside as well as inside the institutions of the National Health Service.

Women's health groups also encouraged and developed better sex education for young women in schools, stressing the need for more positive and independent images of women's sexuality. Feminists were busy seeking greater knowledge of and control over their own bodies, while at the same time fighting for better

social provision and social benefits for childcare. They were also, of course, demanding men's greater involvement in childcare and domestic work. 'A Woman's Right to Choose', which became the slogan of the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) set up in 1975, was a shorthand for a lot more than legal abortion.

By the mid 1970s socialist feminist theory in Britain and the US was fairly consistently arguing that it was the social arrangements for having and rearing children which created the material basis for men's power over women. In capitalist society reproduction is organised through the 'private' sphere of the family, and, seen as the primary responsibility of women, this serves to separate women from any central or dominant role in the public sphere of production, and control of the market. It is this separation, and its related ideologies, which were identified as the basis for women's economic, social and political dependence on men. Men had thus gained control over women's sexuality and domestic labour; the key to their power over women. The power relations between men and women are enshrined in the rights given to men within marriage, and (a point most socialist feminists were always at pains to emphasise) are manifested in and daily experienced through the strength of received ideas about men and women: their separate spheres, distinct capacities, contrasting desires and emotions. Within this theoretical framework, our ideas about men's and women's sexuality were seen as one very distinct aspect of the more general ideologies of sexual difference. Socialist feminists therefore stressed the need to analyse and attack existing ideologies, and were later increasingly to emphasise the role of the unconscious in sustaining them, and in determining behaviour.

It is one thing, however, to search for a theoretical framework in which to locate men's control over women's sexuality in the material world and its dominant ideologies: it is another to provide a more detailed and specific theoretical understanding and explanation of human sexual relations. It is quite another task again for each of us in practice to grapple with the doubts, dilemmas and difficulties we face individually concerning sex.

Our problems were not immediately theoretical ones, but rather, for most heterosexual feminists, were to do with the hopes, fears and resentments many of us experienced in sexual

relations with men. And it is here of course that radical feminist approaches to sexuality had, and have, an immediate and accessible appeal. In radical feminist theory all relations between women and men are, and always have been, determined by men's collective effort to assert and maintain power over women. This is the nature of patriarchy – the first and most fundamental power relation in all societies. In the early radical feminist writing of Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, men's sexuality was, above all else, directed towards the conquest of women. It involved exploitation and domination. Firestone wrote, 'Yes, love means an entirely different thing to men than to women: it means ownership and control ...'[28] Kate Millett saw patriarchal power as essentially phallic power, expressed most clearly in men's sexual exploitation of women. She portrayed what she termed the 'sexual cannibalism' in the writings of Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer, as a true 'literary reflection' of the reality of patriarchy.[29] These authors exposed the real nature of men's designs on women as sadistic, abusive, controlling, and subordinating.

Radical feminist thought here is persuasive because the violent and sadistic sexual fantasies flowing from the pens of these eminent men are familiar to us all. And even if, as other feminists have since pointed out, works like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* are not in any clear sense abusive of women, other texts from the literary canon handed down to us most certainly are.[30] Radical feminist 'exposure' of male sexuality is not so different from 'common sense' assumptions about sexuality: that it is aggressive and male. When Roger Scruton writes of 'the unbridled ambition of the phallus'[31] or Enoch Powell informs us – quoting from the Book of Genesis – that 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth',[32] they express similar thoughts. It is a common sense which creates, as much as it reflects, the reality it describes.

What was to shock and enrage feminists, eventually to the point of hopeless despair, was the initial public denial and persisting public tolerance of men's sexual violence towards women, especially from men in authority. The blindness towards this reality was expressed, ironically, in the early writing of Germaine Greer. It encapsulates perfectly the nonchalance of liberals and particularly of sexual radicals towards questions of men's violence:

> It is true that men use the threat of physical force, usually histrionically, to silence nagging wives: but it is almost always a sham. It is actually a game of nerves, and can be turned aside fairly easily.[33]

Such statements could perhaps themselves be cast aside as naive, a failure of perception induced by a commitment to promote more positive attitudes towards sexuality, were they not also coupled with some knowledge of the reality of men's sexual violence towards women and collusion with the myth that women were ultimately to blame. So Greer informed us: 'Women are always precipitating scenes of violence in pubs and dance halls';[34] 'Many of the vile and cruel things which men do to women are done at women's instigation';[35] 'If women would only offer a genuine alternative to the treadmill of violence the world might breathe a little longer with less pain.'[36] In these comments which, hopefully, must sound a little strange even to the most confirmed sexist today, Greer was merely reflecting what was still the current opinion of most people in the early seventies. The popular psychiatric wisdom of Anthony Storr, for example, had quite recently informed the world that 'The nagging, aggressive woman is often unconsciously demanding that which she most fears' – men's sexual domination and aggression.[37] But in undertaking to shatter this particular 'common sense' mythology, feminists were to find it increasingly difficult to hold on to any progressive sexual politics at all.

Confronting Men's Sexual Violence against Women

It was the issue of men's domestic violence against women and children which feminists were forced to confront early in the 1970s. The first Women's Aid refuge was opened, without actually being planned, when a number of battered women sought help and safety after the Chiswick Women's Centre opened up in 1971. Over the next few years dozens of other local groups of feminists helped to set up and support similar refuges for women trying to escape from violent men. They were always democratically and collectively run to ensure maximum autonomy for and participation from all women. In 1975 the

National Women's Aid Federation was formed from 35 of these groups. Its aims were to provide temporary refuge for all battered women and their children, as well as to publicise the rapidly growing evidence of the appalling extent of domestic violence: 25 per cent of all violent crime is wife assault. Women's Aid also campaigned for changes in the law, in public housing provision and in social policy to protect and provide for battered women. Feminists in Women's Aid saw the problem of violence in the home and women's difficulty escaping from it as the result of the general social subordination of women, and the particular economic and legal dependence of married women on their husbands (especially married women with young children). Women's domestic dependence upon men, it was stressed, was organised through and insisted upon by the state via inadequate child benefit and the absence of nursery provision; the low wages paid for women's jobs were also part of this dependence.[38]

But however much women were trapped and weakened by their greater economic and social powerlessness, and however much some men were brutalised by existing social conditions, the abominable cruelty and persistent sexual abuse many women suffered in the one place they most needed safety and security triggered a stronger and sharper hostility from feminists towards men. A rhetoric of battle emerged in some feminist writing, particularly from feminists working with battered women. Women were taking up arms against the collective terrorism of men. The old sex war (part joke, part serious) between individuals was being organised on a new, collective and deadly serious basis. From 1974, alongside the work with battered women which was pioneered in Britain and which spread to the US, Canada and elsewhere, feminists in Britain began similar work in relation to rape, this time drawing upon work already begun in the US. By 1975 the first Rape Crisis Centre had opened in London, to provide support and counselling for women victims of rape. It also campaigned to change legal, police and medical practices which, firmly in the hands of male authorities, accepted the mythology that many women in some sense provoked, colluded in, or deserved sexual violence from men. Some women, the myth went, were 'innocent', but many were 'guilty'; guilty, feminists concluded, of appearing to men as independent, actively sexual people.

Feminists urgently needed to understand the prevalence of rape in our society, and to see how a mythology of men's sexual needs could serve so readily to blame the victim and not the perpetrator of sexual outrages against women. As with domestic violence, feminists began by seeing rape as an extension of women's general social subordination. Discussing 'the rape controversy' in 1975, Anna Coote and Tess Gill wrote:

> Like the battering of women in the home, rape is primarily a social problem, rooted in centuries of male predominance and in the links our society has fostered between property, sex and violence ... The problem cannot be tackled effectively unless changes are made in the social conditions that encourage violence and keep women in an inferior position.[39]

However, the enormity of so many evil crimes against women, and the hypocritical, contradictory reactions or dismissive contempt of the media, courts, police, doctors and others towards them, once again fuelled feminist rage towards men.

The tigers of wrath may be wiser than the horses of instruction. When it comes to showing men what women think of male indifference to the suffering of women, rage is appropriate; but nevertheless, for understanding men's and women's sexuality – 'perverse' or otherwise – rage alone has proved inadequate.

By 1975, some feminists in the women's liberation movement, particularly those connected with Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Centres, had increasingly more to say on one aspect of men's sexual behaviour: its coercive and violent manifestations. But other feminists, especially those who had sexual relations with men, felt increasingly less able to talk about their own sexual practices and experiences. Since the need to explore personal life and experience was at the heart of the 1970s feminist movement, and sexuality certainly still preoccupied most feminists – whether lesbian, celibate, or still predominantly heterosexual – this silence was clearly a sign of trouble. The British feminist anthology *No Turning Back* covering the years 1975 to 1980 contained not a single article on heterosexuality.[40] A subsequent project by Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan in 1982 to gather together all that had been written more recently by feminists specifically on sexuality had to be abandoned when they discovered how little

there was. They chose instead to solicit new articles for their book *Sex and Love*.[41]

Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell reflected upon this silence in *Sweet Freedom*, their history of women's liberation. They attributed it to a frustrating and futile struggle fought out between 'heterosexual chauvinism' and 'lesbian separatism', which they believed had produced stalemate and disappointment for the majority of feminists who could identify with neither position.[42] But their account of heterosexual chauvinism relied solely upon Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which, though very influential, is surely a pre-feminist text or at the very least an unusual feminist text in that it was known to have little, if any, connection to the contemporary women's movement. (Despite popular opinion *The Female Eunuch* is unrepresentative of women's liberation in its early days; the movement predominantly rejected Greer's individualistic anarchism and dismissal of collective action.) The strengthening of a lesbian separatist analysis of sexuality, on the other hand, was most influential only after 1978, and was, it seems to me, as much a product of the silence over heterosexuality as its cause.

Sexology and Feminist Theorising of Sexuality

I think the silence on heterosexuality in the late seventies has a more general explanation, not one simply based on the women's liberation movement. It is linked to the inadequacies of the theories of sexuality available for feminists to draw upon, and consequent weaknesses in feminist sexual politics. Feminist thought on sexuality in the 1970s was, as I have suggested, influenced by the ideas and research which the 'science of sexology' had been popularising over the last hundred years. We can understand many current debates better if we return to the history of these ideas.

It was the classic case studies of Krafft-Ebing, recording in horror the pitiful plight of the sexual 'perverts' paraded before the law courts of Vienna in the 1880s, which had pioneered this new area of research and theory. In Britain, also in the 1880s, Havelock Ellis began his massive global survey and categoris-

ation of all the known varieties of sexual performance. He presented his resulting display of human 'sexual deviations' as the product of some core essence of each individual. People were born with different types of sexual desires and proclivities. For Krafft-Ebing and for Havelock Ellis the single most salient feature of sexuality was its over-riding significance for the individual and for society generally. (Few subsequent sexologists have demurred from this view.) The new emphasis on 'private life' which accompanied the development of capitalism, suggested that it was indeed sexuality which provided the key to most of the problems which can disrupt society. People's personal lives in the domestic sphere were seen as necessarily split off from the public and rational world of production and the market, and a potential threat to that world. In line with contemporary Darwinian theory, which stressed the evolutionary base of human behaviour, sexual behaviour was seen as driven by an inner 'natural instinct', and one of almost overpowering and uncontrollable strength. (At least, that is, as it manifested itself in the human male.)

The founders of sexology thus provided instinctivist and essentialist explanations of sexual behaviour, seeing it – however complex and varied its manifestations – as flowing directly from some inner biological essence. This is an idea which should be familiar to us, corresponding as it does to all our common sense assumptions about sexuality to this day. As Jeffrey Weeks argues, setting out to record and classify what they saw as 'the truth of the sexual', sexology has played its part in promoting the idea of sex as the centre of identity.[43] Sexologists in the twentieth century were to modify some of the emphases of their forefathers, and, in particular, to distance themselves from the pervasive pessimism of Krafft-Ebing (and of Freud), with their grim vision of the potentially dangerous and anti-social nature of the sexual impulse. They stressed instead its beneficial effects for humanity, in serving to cement (so they believed) the ties of matrimony. But they rejected neither the biologism nor the essentialism of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis.

Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s and 1950s, and Masters and Johnson in the 1960s, undertook their own 'authoritative' investigations of human sexual behaviour at a time when behaviouristic stimulus-response psychology had replaced the

earlier instinctivist psychology as the dominant theoretical framework of psychology. This meant they set out to describe and quantify the specific types of physical stimulation which were effective in producing what they could label – and for them, more importantly, measure – as the definitive sexual response: the physical contractions of orgasm. Taking their lead from contemporary behaviouristic social learning theory, both Kinsey and Masters and Johnson stressed the role of learning in determining which types of stimulation were sexually arousing. But their description of the sexual process was, if anything, even more physical and biologistic than their predecessors.

'Relax, stroke gently, if you want to come.' The booming sexual therapy courses offered by Masters and Johnson from the mid-sixties served as the model for countless other programmes, with the apparently successful formula of 'sensate focusing', to prepare partners in search of better sex for the learning of new sexual techniques. Indeed, better sex, within the monogamous heterosexual couple relationship, was to become everybody's birthright in the crusading publications of Masters and Johnson.[44] (It was also presented as a cure for all social ills, seen in Britain and in the US as stemming from the ever upwardly spiralling rate of divorce.) Most centrally of all, Masters and Johnson stressed that *women* must now be given their fair share of physical sexual release – if no other release – within the heterosexual union. Orgasmic equality! This was the goal devoutly sought by the new school of sex therapists, fully aware as never before, through Kinsey's depressing surveys and the many which had followed them, of how profoundly unequal and unjust orgasmic distribution between the sexes appeared to be. The old beast within, the dangerous sex impulse itself, could, in their view, be tamed and trained, could even serve to nurture better and fairer social relations between the sexes. Such was the optimistic, if mechanistic and misleading, message of contemporary sexology.

Feminists, though quick to pick up on what Masters and Johnson pictured as the magnificently expansive and recurring orgasmic contractability of the human female, were not fooled by Masters and Johnson's propaganda for fucking, that is, for heterosexual normality. Masters and Johnson had insisted that 'penile thrusting' in the vagina should be adequate stimulation

for female orgasm, due to the resulting movement of the clitoral hood over the clitoris. To this assertion, feminist sex researcher Shere Hite had retorted that we might just as well say that the pulling of a man's testicles should be adequate stimulation for male orgasm. Shere Hite's own survey *The Hite Report* suggested that only 30 per cent of women could have orgasms regularly through intercourse, direct stimulation of the clitoris being necessary for the majority of women to reach orgasm.[45] This meant, as most feminists perceived with pleasure, that as far as orgasmic stimulation was concerned, men were physically irrelevant: women could as easily go it alone, with each other, or however else they wished. (That physical stimulation might have absolutely nothing to do with the dynamics of desire, which are largely unconscious, was something which most feminists at that time seemed not to have noticed. Or, if we had, we could not find a 'public' way of saying so in the feminist discourse of the day.)

Many feminists were fooled, however, by the crude and simplistic behaviourist psychology of Masters and Johnson, corresponding as it did to much that passed for explanation in psychology in general in both Britain and the US. Not only was sexual behaviour reduced to physical techniques and bodily sensations, separated off from their cultural and social meanings or their context within social relations, but human consciousness was reduced to sets of attitudes which could be conditioned at will. Whilst Shere Hite's findings were different from those of Masters and Johnson, she shared their behaviourist approach. With 'great joy', so she told us, she concluded from her four years of research into human sexuality that:

> There is no great mystery about why a woman has an orgasm. It happens with the right stimulation, quickly, pleasurably, and reliably ... The whole key is adequate stimulation.[46]

This was to prove a misleading type of optimistic voluntarism for feminists. It paved the way for the pessimistic reversal of much of the earlier feminist thought on sexuality which occurred in the late seventies: the shift from an emphasis on women's sexual pleasure to an emphasis on the dangers which might accompany it.

A crop of self-identified feminist advice books and articles

were published and eagerly consumed by feminists in the early seventies, most originating from the US. In Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation*, Lonnie Barbach's *For Yourself: The Fulfilment of Female Sexuality*, and Barbara Seaman's *Free and Female*, it was, as the titles suggested, repeatedly emphasised that women could (and for their mental health and fighting spirit most certainly should) learn to acquire the skills which would enable them to fulfil their own, unique 'sexual needs'.[47] The message was always the same: women can, through exploration of their own bodily and genital sensations, find out about their 'true needs'; having done so, they will know how to get what they want from sex; women do not need to wait for somebody else to fulfil their sexual needs, they can do it quite adequately for themselves.[48] Once aware of your own *unique* bodily sensations (if you're having trouble finding an identity, you could probably find it here) and once you have learned to throw off any remaining old-fashioned perceptions of self (simply by deciding to), these books all suggest that satisfaction can be guaranteed – with or without a sexual partner. Here, the idea of women's sexuality as some type of 'inner essence' or 'body electric', a source of individuality and identity, completely submerges any notions of sexuality as a type of communication, understanding or relationship.

Romantic aspirations, in any case, were dismissed in these early years of feminism as dangerous delusions, promoted only to trap women into marriage or other types of emotional dependency on men, a dependency which could never be satisfactory for any real feminist because of the inevitable inbuilt inequality of overestimating or idealising one's sexual partner. Women only formed romantic attachments with men because they had no secure sense of themselves. As Verena Stefan wrote in the feminist bestseller *Shedding* in 1975:

> I was still in love with Dave, lying there in the hospital with a urinary tract infection. He regretted the fact that we wouldn't be able to go to bed with each other for a while. I did too. *I needed him because I didn't have my self.* [my emphasis][49]

There is little wonder and even less desire in such feminist reflection on sex. Indeed there is little emotion of any intensity at all in this bland optimism about women reclaiming their bodies,

and hence themselves. Yet such writing, it must be admitted, did have a liberating effect on many feminists, at least for a while. It was encouraging to believe, as Hite reassured us, that 'controlling your own stimulation symbolises owning your own body, and is a very important step towards freedom.'[50] Eleanor Stephens was partially right when she concluded in *Spare Rib* in 1975 that:

> Amongst all the issues raised by the women's movement, the feminist approach to female sexuality is one which has, for many women, completely transformed our feelings about ourselves ... The implications of taking responsibility for our sexuality reach into all areas of our lives, giving women a new sense of autonomy and power.[51]

Spare Rib by this time had replaced its confident ridicule of men's sexual obsessions with personal descriptive pieces, which were then phased out to be replaced by pieces on the mechanics of sex and how to have orgasms. So by the mid seventies heterosexual sex was taken out of the context of personal relationships and put in terms of individual needs which were being met, or not met. Alongside this was the growing importance of articles on women's refuges and rape crisis centres, stressing men's violence.[52]

Yet in the early years of women's liberation many feminists did, at least some of the time, feel a sense of collective power and autonomy which made us a lot less desperate. Less desperate, anyway, to find some man to provide a sense of meaning and satisfaction in our lives. We could feel such autonomy so long as sisterhood was blooming, when it felt secure, exciting, and stimulating to fill up each and every moment with living the feminist struggle.

Again, it is the rhetoric of Robin Morgan, whose collected poems *Monster* were published here in 1973, which celebrates some of the easily eroticised excitement of those times:

> I want a women's revolution like a lover
> I lust for it, I want so much this freedom
> this end to struggle and fears and lies
> we all exhale, that, I could die just
> with the passionate utterance of that desire.[53]

Less theatrically, and perhaps more characteristically, Sheila Shulman's *Pome to Jackie* written in 1974 sums up a more restrained but similar ecstasy:

> When I say (meaning you) 'my sister',
> some childhood loneliness is healed.[54]

It was, I think, the shared embrace of feminism itself and not the emergence of any individual, unique and liberated bodily sensations which felt something like the promise of a new kind of loving. It was not some new authentic female sexuality of our own we had discovered, but the desire to bring into being the love of womankind for herself.

When, by the mid seventies, it became essential to integrate this optimistic feminist vision of women's powerful inner sexuality with the depressing awareness of men's sexual violence towards women and the misogyny and sexism embedded within the imagery and language of heterosexuality, it was almost inevitable that these opposed preoccupations with the sexual would collapse into the idea of opposed sexual natures.

The early enthusiasm for women reclaiming their 'authentic sexuality', expressing a sexuality which was 'essentially female', soon took a prescriptive tone in feminist writing. It is well illustrated in Anja Meulenbelt's *For Ourselves* published in Britain in 1981. Women's needs, as Meulenbelt illustrated them, are all positive and progressive: women want equality in sexual relations and to feel independent and in control.[55] Women's sexual sensations, she wrote, repeating what had by then become feminist orthodoxy, are mostly unconnected to genital penetration, and establish the basis for that happy 'love affair' we can all have with ourselves. Meulenbelt assured us that 'there isn't just *one* kind of liberated or emancipated sexuality', but strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads us to it.[56] For example, observing that some women do 'make an orgasm' through movement in the vagina (and don't expect anyone to do it for you!), she adds, 'But it isn't as common as we have been taught. And even if you *can* do it like that, the question remains do you *want* to? (author's emphasis)[57] The question is loaded, hammered home for us in the interviews with individual women which the book included: 'You didn't really expect that you could come from fucking?' I should hope not! But the

interviewee hastens to reassure her questioner: 'Oh no, but I didn't like fucking either, it was always a disaster!'[58] That's more like it!

The Rise and Rise of Revolutionary Feminism

Despite the sexual fulfilment promised from predominantly solipsistic sexual *acts* – a surely somewhat lonely pursuit – an altogether bleaker view had crept into feminist discussion of sexual relationships from the mid seventies onwards. The joys and delights of female sexuality had proved, unsurprisingly, more elusive than many feminist texts had promised. Both heterosexual and lesbian feminists still found that their sexual relationships involved much the same mixtures of pleasure and satisfaction, frustration, ambivalence, and difficult dependencies as they always had.[59] The old optimism that we could simply choose to transform our sexual experiences evaporated.

But it was not the idea of some inner core of genuine, positive, female needs and desires which was rejected, nor the idea of women finding their shared female identity through a discovery of their 'authentic' sexuality. The editorial collective of the socialist feminist magazine *Scarlet Woman* introduced their issue on sexuality in 1981 by reaffirming the belief that 'all women whether lesbian or heterosexual [do] have the same kind of sexuality.' And, they added, 'we also think that there is a real difference between women's sexuality and men's – perhaps related to our different reproductive functions, differences exacerbated by patriarchy.'[60] But there was also, by this time, an equally strong belief that women's own sexuality was 'crippled' and 'denied' by men's imposition of 'compulsory heterosexuality'.[61] A prevailing 'political lesbian' or sexual separatist ideology was growing stronger within the women's movement. Political lesbianism, however, was not the affirmation of a sexual orientation in its own right: sexual desire for and engagement with women was not its defining characteristic. It was defined negatively by its rejection of heterosexuality: a rejection seen as the political solution to the problem of male dominance. (Some lesbian feminists, not surprisingly, were soon to object to such a desexualised, tactical definition in which their sexuality was seen to elect them as a type of moral vanguard.)[62]

The turning point in the adoption of this new feminist analysis of sexuality in Britain was when the Birmingham National Women's Liberation Conference in 1978 passed (against such fierce opposition that it terminated all future national conferences) the motion to make 'the right to define our sexuality' *the* over-riding demand of the women's movement, preceding all other demands. Men's sexual domination of women, which prevented the emergence of women's self-defined sexuality, was now being formally accepted as the pivot of women's oppression. The old feminist message that 'the personal is political' had been inverted to become 'the political is personal', and the personal is sexual. The message had once served to enable feminists to throw off self-blame and self-hatred by being able to see their apparently 'personal' problems as socially produced, a product of all the ways in which women were subordinated – legally, financially, culturally, socially and sexually. It now served more to induce personal guilt and self-blame, where some feminists felt accused of involvement in 'incorrect' sexual and personal relationships.

The clearest statements locating women's oppression in men's sexual practices and 'the institution' of heterosexuality came, in Britain, from a few widely influential revolutionary feminist groups which emerged in the late seventies – ironically, mostly composed of former socialist feminists. But their ideas were not new to feminist politics; they were only a magnification of themes always present in radical feminism. Susan Griffin, for instance, had written back in 1971: 'the basic elements of rape are involved in all heterosexual relationships.'[63] The paper 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality', written in 1979, summarised the revolutionary feminist position. It is a simple one. Sex is the problem; avoiding heterosexual contact is the solution. Here, rejecting the significance of class and race, the writers affirmed that it is specifically through sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained.[64] Therefore, 'Giving up fucking for a feminist is about taking your politics seriously.'[65] (They later qualified this statement; women cannot actually give up 'fucking', only 'getting fucked', because: 'We now think it's rubbish to say that women fuck men; what happens is that men fuck women, or women get fucked by men.')[66] Heterosexuality is damned, for,

like Original Sin, it inevitably enfeebles a woman ('undermines her confidence and saps her strength') and empowers a man ('makes him stronger, not just over one woman but over all women').

The awesome, all-conquering power attributed to the penis in male – and female – fantasy, as the mighty symbol of men's power to subdue the world, is here presented as literal reality, lived ideology with a vengeance. How could such concrete reductionism, such phallic obsession, have got such a hold on feminism? Partly, I would suggest, because feminists had always tended to write about sex as though it existed autonomously, outside the context of relationships.

One apparent strength of revolutionary feminist writing, apart from its expression of a realistic anger at so many men's violence towards women, was that it correctly challenged the liberal complacency behind earlier feminist appropriations of the prescriptions of sexologists. These had avoided the question of men's power and men's violence (in and out of the bedroom) to concentrate their advice on men's inadequate sexual performance, and the joys of a more masturbatory sexuality, unconnected to any particular type of sexual partner or relationship. But, more frequent and better orgasms did not empower women. By the mid seventies it was obvious that sexual liberation and greater sexual satisfaction, in themselves, did not create or even threaten to create greater power for women. They certainly could not do so if they occurred in isolation from more general social and economic equality. It was this aspect of women's liberation which many men, perhaps mendaciously, often claimed to support, while the media were not slow to depict and apparently endorse a greater sexual assertiveness and bodily enjoyment in the 'new' woman.

But revolutionary feminists avoided other contradictions: some women wanted to improve their sexual relations with men while also wanting to confront the frightening prevalence of men's hostility and violence towards women. Instead revolutionary feminists merely dissolved the contradiction by collapsing all heterosexuality into 'male violence'. They rightly re-examined the notion of 'women gaining control of their own sexuality' and the mistaken sexual politics which equated such a pursuit with undermining the power and privilege of men. But

they went further, and accused all sexologists, and those they had influenced, of a conscious and successful conspiracy to undermine and subvert feminist aspirations by pressurising women into subordination through sex.

In a more recent analysis, *The Sexuality Papers*, published in 1984, revolutionary feminists present a historical sketch of the last hundred years as a century in which sexologists from Havelock Ellis to Kinsey and Masters and Johnson have undermined women's struggle for equality.[67] There is, they argue, 'a negative relation' between sexual reform and the stress on women's sexual pleasure in marriage on the one hand, and women's struggle for equality on the other. No evidence is provided in support of their central thesis that the ideology of sexual liberation has caused the containment of feminist aspirations (whatever may have been the professed or hidden intentions of its advocates) other than the temporal overlap of the decline of militant feminism and the development of the sex reform movement in the 1920s. One could more plausibly argue that it was the growth of welfare feminism (the successful 'maternal endowment' campaigns to improve women's maternal and domestic lives) led by Eleanor Rathbone and others in the 1920s which caused the decline of militant feminism. But no single factor propels or explains such historical shifts.

If we accept, as indeed we might, that the conscious goal of Masters and Johnson's sex therapy, and that for which they were originally funded, was to shore up heterosexuality and marriage (and thereby male domination) by forging a bond of pleasure between the sexes, we would have to conclude that they have failed spectacularly. The divorce rate has soared by 400 per cent in Britain over the two decades in which the sex therapists have supposedly fought to preserve marriage, and even more in the US.[68] It seems plausible to me, and the moral right would agree, that women's expectations of sexual pleasure (so often frustrated in marriage) are more likely to threaten than to stabilise marital harmony, at least once women have any possibilities for economic independence.

The Symbolic and the Real

Revolutionary feminist thought still appeals to many feminists,

however, because it connects with other aspects of women's sexual experience which the earlier behaviouristic promises of sexual liberation completely ignored. It emphasises the power of the symbolic (the dominant social imagery and language of sex) in shaping our thoughts, desires, and experience of sex. ('No act of penetration can escape its function and its symbolic power.')[69] But there is a more complex interplay between popular symbols of active sexuality as aggressive and male, and our particular sexual experiences. Our personal histories of pleasure, pain, desire and coercion surrounding sexual experience shape our understandings of sex at the same time as popular symbols and meanings shape our experience. Other meanings also become available to us from within feminist thought, alongside images we may have picked up from elsewhere, of strong and sexually assertive women, and gentle and caring men.

But it is true, although not the only truth, that the idea of power and submission is built into the language and imagery of heterosexual encounter. It is also true that sexual fantasy and experience are saturated with the eroticisation of power. But the connection between symbol, fantasy, experience and behaviour is a treacherously complex one (which I will return to in discussing pornography), and has, not surprisingly, served to disquiet a good many feminists. For instance, masochistic fantasy is a common source of sexual arousal in women. (It is also a common source of sexual arousal in men.)[70] Women's sexualised fantasies of submission to men can certainly seem very distressing alongside a feminist project for equality, all the more distressing, of course, if we see our sexuality as the core of our individual identity and the key to social change.

How does a feminist handle the fantasy of desire for sexual mastery from men alongside the day-to-day struggle to combat men's power in every sphere of life? The revolutionary feminist project presents itself as a very immediate way of handling this problem and removing conflict. If heterosexual contact really is a type of sexual violence, then feminists' own 'perverse' masochistic fantasies can seem to make some sense as the only way that women have learned to cope with men's coercive sexuality. They are forced upon women, rather like the nightmares of shell-shocked soldiers who relive the experience of battle to help them cope with it in future.

Justine Jones in the revolutionary feminist anthology *Women Against Violence Against Women* argues that women have been 'influenced to be masochists from a very young age, so that we'll become heterosexual and enjoy it'.[71] Writing of her 'hatred' of her own masochistic fantasies, she chooses to repudiate them as unconnected to her own self-defined sexuality: 'I *hate* them and fight to accept I'm not alone, nor a pervert.'[72] She must repudiate them, for she still believes that the 'stirrings of our own self-defined sexuality challenge male sexuality at its *roots*' (her emphasis).[73]

Clearly, we are not going to challenge patriarchy at its roots by exposing our masochistic fantasies. What is not explained, whatever the coerciveness and conditioning by men or sexologists, is the pleasure some women find in sex with men. Rape is not pleasurable. Women are not confused about this, whatever men or women might fantasise about it. Women's (or men's) experience of sexual arousal to masochistic fantasies of dominance and submission bears not the remotest resemblance to the actual experience of rape; yet it is crucial to the revolutionary feminist argument that sexual fantasies connect *directly* to reality. It would follow that if some women are excited by fantasies of rape, they must enjoy the experience of rape – at least a little bit. This is dangerous nonsense. And if women's sexual fantasies of domination carry over into everyday servility towards men, why do men's well-documented masochistic fantasies not serve the same function? Neither women's nor men's sexual fantasies reflect simply the reality of male dominance and misogyny (although they are influenced by this reality). They draw upon all manner of infantile sexual wishes, active and passive, loving and hating, all the way back to our very earliest feelings of desire and pleasure in childhood.

There is in revolutionary feminism, as there has been in most feminist writing about sex, an unresolved tension over what is meant by 'the sexual'. Revolutionary feminism begins from a clear and repeated rejection of the essentialism and biologism of sexology ('male sexuality is socially constructed not biologically determined') only to return in a circular fashion to essential male sexual needs now redefined as male power needs. It is, they argue, the exercise of male sexuality which creates and determines men's power, and yet it is 'the need to dominate and

exercise power in sexual activity' which determines the nature of male sexuality.[74] We are not given any explanation of why men need to control women, or how they succeed, except through sexual activity. Are there not sturdier weapons than the penis? One way or another, and despite insistent assertions to the contrary, we are forced to leave behind the complex historical formation of men's social power – and how this social power confers a symbolic power to the penis as the defining characteristic of the male – to return to a naked sexual capacity which can be, and therefore is, used to control women. In the description of the relentless power of the steely prick, the biological, so forcefully ejected from the front door, swaggers in, cocksure, through the back.

The revolutionary feminist ascendancy at the close of the seventies thus strengthened the return of essentialist thinking in feminism, re-asserting an ahistorical image of sexuality existing outside specific social contexts and relationships. In this respect, revolutionary feminists resemble the sexologists, medical 'experts' and pornographers they so fiercely oppose. They also strengthened, of course, the idea of men's and women's fundamentally opposed sexual natures, reinforcing all the most undialectical, dualistic thinking of 'male' versus 'female', 'active' versus 'passive', 'power' versus 'submission'. Ironically, by the mid eighties revolutionary feminists found it necessary to turn their attention from heterosexuality to the policing of lesbian identities, particularly of lesbian sadomasochism. They accused lesbians who spoke of finding pleasure in sexual fantasies of power and submission, or, more reprehensibly still, enjoyed acting out such roles in consensual sex acts, of internalising 'male' values. Like heterosexual women, some lesbians too were now vilified as supporting men's power and men's violence against women through refusing to change, or else to repress and silence, their sexual fantasies and behaviour.[75]

This whole elaborate declaration of women's Original Innocence, and the need to deny or repress our own sexual experience as 'false' or 'perverted' would be unnecessary if, however, we adopted what I see as a more satisfactory analysis of 'sexuality'. Such an analysis would reject the idea of a unitary and conflict-free sexual essence at the core of women's (or men's) identity, and would also reject the idea of sex as the key to

self-expression or the necessary clue to social change. But that would be to challenge one of the most basic assumptions of bourgeois thought – a blow to the heart indeed.

Revolutionary feminist literature which treats *all* sexual contact with men as damaging to women cannot begin to do justice to those groups of women – Black women, working class and immigrant women – whose more general social powerlessness and vulnerability has meant they have suffered most, and often fought hardest, against exploitative sexual behaviour from men. Nor does it mention in its theoretical analysis that Western images of sex are not only sexist but also quintessentially racist. For in the mythology of sex, the 'beast' of male sexuality is also the 'beast of darkness', the 'black beast'. White men's and women's guilt and fears over sex have been projected on to all Black people, creating the myth of the Black male superstud, and the lewd and lascivious Black woman. Black men historically have been and still are more harshly punished than white men for sexual crimes against white women. They are still more likely to be falsely accused of rape, where once they were lynched in the United States and elsewhere for the merest suggestion of a sexual advance to a white woman. Black women, on the other hand, have been sexually exploited with complete impunity by white men. As Angela Davis wrote in 1981, 'The historical knot binding Black women – systematically abused and violated by white men – to Black men maimed and murdered because of the racist manipulation of the rape charge – has just begun to be acknowledged to any significant extent.'[76] And from about 1983, it was the rise of Black feminism and disputes over race which were eventually to muffle, though not resolve, the fierce debates generated by revolutionary feminism and political lesbianism in feminist gatherings and publications.

Feminist Explanations of Rape

Revolutionary feminism was most influential beyond feminist circles in its analysis of rape and violence towards women as acts necessary to maintain the universal system of male domination. All men, they argued, rely upon such practices, whether individually coercive and violent or not. Such an analysis is now

often presented as *the* feminist explanation of rape and male violence. It was first widely popularised in 1975 by the North American radical feminist Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will.* It was further developed and elaborated by Andrea Dworkin who states with finality that male power 'authentically originates in the penis'.[77]

This explanation of rape, however, ignores the absence of reported rape in some societies, and provides a very strange analysis of power relations in general.[78] For while powerful groups do use force as a last resort against threatened insurrection, in modern societies the everyday practices of domination, in every sphere including the sexual, are not usually maintained by brute physical force.[79] (The use of physical force, in fact, often characterises the behaviour of the relatively powerless.) And indeed, if sexual coercion really were the ultimate and characteristic instrument of men's power, it is hard to see why women would not long ago have acquired the physical skills and equipment to 'disarm' rapists – unless we assume women are both blind and stupid (blinded and stupefied, revolutionary feminists might qualify). Men's power, in my view, is not reducible to direct sexual coercion of women. And tackling the problem of rape means, above all, tackling the dominant mythology which sees rape as an inevitable product of male needs, whether for sexual release or for aggression and dominance.

The fear of rape is certainly a crucial factor in restricting women's freedom, often keeping us, at least in public, sexually passive, hypocritical and submissive to men. It is true that men, both individually and collectively, do rape women to enhance their sense of 'masculinity', and hence of power. As I suggest in the next chapter, rape expresses many 'needs': anger, inadequacy, guilt and fear of women, all linked with men's attempts to affirm their 'masculinity'. The prevalence and problem of rape in our society stems in part from the cultural connections which are made between 'masculinity' and heterosexual performance. As the gay liberation movement has argued, it ties in with the repression and ridicule of 'effeminate' masculinities, and in particular with the policing of 'deviant' sexual identities, such as male homosexuality. The prevalence of rape in our society stems as well from the economic, political and ideological practices

which, in creating men's power over women, have allowed men sexually to abuse women with relative impunity.

In combating the menace of rape, feminists should not endorse the inevitability of men's urge to dominate women, but rather attack the way in which our society constructs and condones the idea of a coercive sexuality as 'male'. We need to expose and denounce, relentlessly, all the juridical and popular discourse or perception of rape which sees it as an act which can be precipitated by any indication of active sexuality in women, evidence of any such active sexuality signifying the 'guilt' of the raped victim rather than the rapist.[80] We can still observe this assumption in most rape trials, as we saw it in the grotesque abominations of the 'Ripper' murders in England, where the police, the media and the prosecution all at least partially endorsed Peter Sutcliffe's pathological obsession (if not his tactics) with punishing prostitutes – only the most 'respectable' of his victims being described as 'innocent'. We also need to denounce the fact that men's 'private' violence in the home against women is socially condoned and usually unpunished. Similar violence used against others in the workplace, for example, would be met with instant dismissal, whatever the tolerance for milder forms of sexual harassment at work.

As relentlessly, we need to criticise the way in which rape and male violence is sensationalised, glamourised and made sexually titillating in popular culture. In all cases of rape, violence is the dominant motive, and (despite revolutionary feminist and popular concern with it) phallic penetration quite often does not occur. The usefully educative strategy behind Clare Short's ridiculed and defeated amendment to Winston Churchill's censorship Bill in April 1986, for example, was that she sought to prevent the popular press's habitual juxtaposition of rape stories with semi-nude female pin-ups on Page 3. Sex rather than violence is made the primary factor in media coverage of rape, a distortion which conceals the vengeful, fearful, inadequate and disturbed motives behind rape. But a somewhat similar criticism can be made of some feminist analysis of rape. As bell hooks observes, 'Often feminist activists talk about male abuse of women as if it is an exercise of privilege rather than an expression of moral bankruptcy, insanity and dehumanization.'[81]

In tackling the prevalence of rape, then, it is essential that we

are engaged in constructing new definitions and images of women's active sexuality, to which every woman is entitled without courting violence. Similarly, we must be engaged in constructing new images of men's sexuality, seeing that it may be – as well as phallic and assertive – passive, receptive, diffuse and sensual, expressing all manner of joyful and generous as well as twisted and vicious emotions. This means that we must constantly challenge the dominant and obnoxious forms of 'heterosexism' – legal, social and interpersonal – which help maintain rigid and coercive forms of masculinity and a submissive femininity by denying social rights to and condoning physical and sexual violence against all those who fall outside its definitions of the 'normal'. But the central importance of these tasks neither establishes that rape is the single or even the primary way men maintain their power over women, nor that the maintenance of men's collective power is the primary explanation of rape.

Pornography and the Power of Men

It seems likely that it was partly the problems inherent in presenting rape as the root cause of male power which led the radical/revolutionary strand of feminism to a focus on pornography in the 1980s. Men are able to terrorise and dominate women, not simply through the actual performance of rape (a demanding and risky business, whatever its ghastly prevalence); they also terrorise women at all times by surrounding them with the fearful knowledge that, in their eyes, women are nothing other than receptacles for their hatred: by placing women in the swamp of pornography. This is how Andrea Dworkin describes the purpose and effect of pornography: 'The woman's sex is appropriated, her body is possessed, she is used and she is despised: the pornography does it and the pornography proves it.'[82] 'The penis' as a 'symbol of terror', Dworkin tells us, is 'even more significant than the gun, the knife, the bomb, the fist, etc.'[83] Women, she concludes in her lurid book on pornography, 'will know that they are free when the pornography no longer exists.'[84]

In Dworkin's analysis, as well as teaching women their place

as whores, pornography also serves as ubiquitous propaganda, spurring on the flagging or wimpish male to ever greater acts of violence against women, while scaring women off from any possible hope of resistance. 'Pornography is the theory. Rape is the practice', Robin Morgan first suggested; and countless feminist graffiti artists have since proclaimed the same idea. The statement is succinct and powerful. A focus on pornography is popular, as popular with men as with women, with the right as with the left. Pornography does typically encapsulate all that is most distressing and depressing in the portrayal of women's bodies in our own culture: women become sexual commodities, usable, disposable, endlessly available for the titillation of men. Yet, in my view, the idea that pornography, as Dworkin suggests, not only depicts but creates the reality of 'the imperial power of men' is not just an exaggeration but a fundamentally flawed argument.

The billion dollar pornography industry has flourished in the West precisely as women's economic *independence* (a far cry, of course, from women's economic equality) has increased, and the power and control of men over women has declined. No longer is it the case, for instance, that women in the West must always remain in brutal and loveless marriages, whatever the handicaps they face on divorce. There is a correlation between women's financial independence and divorce, which, given that it is most often women who initiate divorce, suggests that it is they who are making the decisions. No longer is the unmarried mother excluded from any respectable career or job, as she was only 20 years ago, nor is she faced with inevitable social ostracism and contempt, though these are not always absent. Women can and do choose to have children without men, though for many this will cause inevitable economic hardship.

We can now sometimes laugh (despite the threat it still poses) at the moral right on the rampage, warning us, like Paul Johnson of the *Daily Telegraph*, that 'the one parent family is a kind of social disease and it is spreading fast'. As the right is well aware, marriage as an institution giving men enormous control over their wives and children has been progressively undermined. In the overwhelming majority of households today men are no longer the sole breadwinners, and as their economic power has declined, domestic conflict and strain have increased in a

situation where 'working' wives shoulder a double burden of work, usually with little real domestic help from husbands. The contradictions in women's lives have certainly deepened, and progress is uneven, but what we have *not* seen is any straightforward increase in men's immediate power over women.

Patriarchal power has declined and conflict increased in the home at a time when the advice columns and other areas of the mass media encourage women in particular to seek and expect more sexual satisfaction from their marital relationships. Women now judge and expose the inadequacies of men's sexual performance, even in counselling programmes on radio and television before an audience of millions, whereas once the virgin wife had only the choice of 'thralldom' or 'frigidity' in sexual matters. Recent research by Mary Louise Ho on agony aunts tells us something of the changes which have taken place. Traditional columnists like Mary Grant were still extolling selflessness in women 20 years ago:

> It would do you and your marriage a power of good if you turned your thoughts away from your own feelings to your husband's. It's not too late to try to make *him* happy.[85]

But, more recently, columnists like Irma Kurtz have a different view. She constantly urges women to put their own needs, interests and careers before any man's, insisting upon greater self-assertiveness in women:

> Be as angry as you want – rage, storm and throw things if you feel like it. Let him see that you are hurt, betrayed, frightened and angry. Don't be afraid of offending him; hasn't he offended you?[86]

In every sphere, it would seem, men can no longer feel so secure in expecting a lifetime of emotional support and sexual servicing from women. In this situation it would seem to me that one very likely explanation for the increased consumption of pornography by men (apart from the significant factor of the opening up of a very highly profitable market for capital at a time when many others are closing down) is that pornography is a compensatory expression of men's *declining* power. It serves to expose not imperial strength but pathetic weakness – a gargantuan need for reassurance that, at least in fantasy, women

can remain eternally objects for men to use and abuse at will. It is the last bark of the stag at bay.

Andy Moye, reflecting as a man on the function and effect of pornography, comes to this conclusion:

> It works by denying the reality which men know and fear to be true. Sex (for men) is not unproblematic but is beset by complications and anxieties – those of sexual isolation, clumsiness, 'inadequacy', the tension attendant on 'doing it right', of not being or feeling sexually desirable. It is in the space between this anxiety and the fantasy realm of a perfect sexual world that pornography achieves its power ...[87]

Pornography, far from being the manifestation of men's power over women, would seem to suggest, as Andy Moye argues, sexual anxiety and paranoia amongst men. It depicts not men's actual sexual control over women, but rather men's neurotic and debilitating obsession with 'the netherworld of phallic failure'.[88] Or again, as Elizabeth Wilson suggests:

> Far from being the celebration of male power, pornography sometimes seems designed to reassure men and allay fears of impotence. Where it is violent, it displays fear and loathing not only of women but also of male passivity ... Some men must degrade women in order to be potent; others must themselves be degraded. Much male sexuality seems compulsive and joyless, plagued by the performance principle, shadowed by deep-seated fears of impotence, inadequacy and failure.[89]

Revolutionary feminists believe that a study of men's 'highly bizarre' sexual fantasies and practices should help us understand how men use their sexual power to retain control over women.[90] In contrast, I would suggest that a study of men's sexual fantasies and obsessions, particularly at their most bizarre, should lead us more to puzzle over how it is still possible for men to retain control over women *despite* their sexuality, not because of it.

I am not, however, trying to suggest that pornography is inoffensive or harmless. It does distress most women, and it has always distressed me. It distresses me first of all because it is so readily incorporated into my own sexual fantasies. Far from being the product of my sexual experiences with men, these fantasies date back to childhood. They seem to me to express an urgent and compelling childhood need to fantasise a type of

maternal loving which I was always so desperate to receive: in fantasy, such loving always took the form of the strong, protective and sensual embrace offered as reparation for my own heroic and humiliating suffering. I have always been at best ambivalent about these fantasies, and would love to be able to disown them as inauthentic intrusions, but the projection would seem all too obvious.

Much of pornography angers and disturbs me now, however, not so much because of its titillation (which has worried me less the more I have thought about it) but rather because of its place in the panorama of sexist objectification and stereotyping of women which engulfs us. And it angers and disturbs me also because it is such a tragic testament to the continuing truth about sex in our society: it is still, despite a hundred years of sexology, experienced as basically dirty, forbidden, offensive and wrong. It is still, too often, a source of despair, frustration, guilt, anxiety and rage, rather than of pleasure and fulfilment. This is true particularly in men, where dominant images of male sexuality and male aggression so easily fuse together; sexual performance can serve – is perhaps sometimes *all* that can serve – to shore up a subjective sense of identity and power.

Many feminists now believe that there must be a direct connection, if not between pornography and the creation of men's power over women, at least between pornography and men's violence against women. It is certainly true that a portrayal of women's sexual availability and submission is the basis of much, though by no means all, pornography. And it is equally true that pornography is predominantly prepared by and for men (whether or not women also find it arousing). There is also a small but familiar percentage of pornography which portrays implicit visual connections between representations of women's passionate sexual submission, women's sexual climax, and death.[91] This would seem to reinforce and condone ideas of women's desire for domination by force, or even worse, to establish a connection between eroticised female bodies and death: a connection brought home to us as we read daily of the diabolical cruelty and sex murder some men inflict upon women.

Psychological research and official statistics, designed and collected to test the link between pornography and violence against women, however, are unclear and contradictory. A series

of psychological investigations by Mosher in 1971 and Jaffe and others in 1974, though predicting that the effects of viewing 'non-aggressive' pornography would strengthen men's approval of the sexual objectification and sexual exploitation of women, found no increase in men's negative verbal comments or callous attitudes expressed about women.[92] A variation on this study by Donnerstein and Barrett in 1978, using similar material but where the subject was subsequently provoked by a man and a woman acting as the researcher's stooge or 'confederate', found that those who had just viewed the pornography were slightly less aggressive to the female than the male confederate.[93] However, a similar study by Donnerstein in 1980, using 'aggressive' pornographic material with female victims, did lead to men displaying increased aggressive behaviour towards the female confederate who later provoked them.[94] Malamuth and others in 1980 studied the long term effects on men of sexual violence in pornographic magazines, and found that the different ways in which rape was portrayed – that is, whether the victim was presented as either 'enjoying' or else harmed by the rape – affected the subjects' attitudes towards women victims in subsequent depictions of rape narratives. Those who had been shown the victim 'enjoying' the rape were less concerned about harmful effects in subsequent stories.[95]

These behaviourist studies are however of limited use. They adopt such a passive and reflex model of human behaviour, devoid of any account of subjective interpretations of the experimental situation or the stimulus material, as to give us little possibility of generalising their findings.

The statistical surveys which have looked for a causal connection between availability of pornographic material and increase in violent crimes against women, have, however even more methodological problems. It is hard to get an accurate measure of either of the two variables, when definitions of pornography are inevitably vague and contentious, and reported crime rates do not necessarily reveal the actual incidence of attacks against women. The official surveys have, nevertheless, up until now rejected any causal relationship between the two. The US National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1970 concluded that in North America there was no consistent relationship between the availability of pornography and changes

in sex crime rates, and that the alleged vast increase in sex crimes had not actually occurred. In Britain the similar Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship set up in 1979 concluded that 'the rising trend in sexual offences generally, and rape and sexual assaults, started long before it is alleged that sexual materials began to be widely available', and also that 'increases in sexual offences generally, including rape and sexual assaults, have been significantly slower in the last 20 years than that in crime generally.'[96]

Both the psychological studies and the statistical surveys, however, suffer from all the weaknesses of traditional social science research on the effects of the media. They focus on immediate, concrete and measurable effects of media consumption in changing attitudes and behaviour, usually finding limited or inconsistent effects. But media images do not operate simply as one-off triggers of responses; rather they operate as a part of the continuous shaping and reshaping of dominant ideas and frameworks of thought. Dominant pornographic imagery is a problem not because it creates instant rapists – the empirical studies show no consistent link between sex offenders and exposure to pornography – but rather because it is one aspect of the continuous social construction of polarised images of women and men. These images usually confirm women as passive, fetishised objects for male consumption, while denying weakness, passivity and 'femininity' in men. In its perpetual and insistent confirmation of men's difference from women, in the way it endorses men's fears and rejection of passivity, pornography inevitably does play a part in constructing a dominant form of masculinity which fears and abuses women, and a dominant form of femininity which expects mastery from men. So while it is true that there is little evidence linking pornographic consumption, on its own, to violence against women, and while it is also true that societies free from pornography, as we know it, are often far more prone to patriarchal violence than our own, it is equally true that much sexist pornography is the repetitive, ritual confirmation of existing ideas of sexual difference, as well as of the illicit and fetishised nature of sex. It is also clear that most women do not like pornography, however difficult (and often unnecessary) feminists have found it to provide any agreed definition of it.

When it celebrates sexist and dehumanising images of women, pornography is a legitimate target of attack by feminists. But, I would suggest, this should not be through the highly ambiguous and unfocused action of firebombing sex shops. Is it really the black rubber knobbly dildo which is threatening us? Even less should such attacks include counterproductive actions like the disruption of screenings of pornographic films organised by women specifically to analyse and understand their content and appeal. Both the above were actions undertaken by feminists organising against pornography in Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) groups in Britain in the 1980s. Most feminists in Britain have not strongly advocated increased state censorship of pornography, but some members of WAVAW do support it (one member publicly announced her support for Mary Whitehouse in a national BBC television discussion on pornography in the early eighties).[97]

The dangers of supporting censorship legislation against pornography are obvious: the lack of agreement over its definition would almost always strengthen the powers of the moral right to police all it sees as 'deviant' sexualities, and indeed any and all representation of explicit sex. This is precisely what is happening with Winston Churchill's 1986 Bill to 'clean up television'. Although he claims to be concerned about violence against women, it is, for example, the homosexuality of Derek Jarman's films *Sebastiane* and *Jubilee*, not the violence of *Starsky and Hutch*, which he and his supporters have explicitly cited as their target.[98] Anti-pornography legislation has been drafted by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon in the US (supported by Mary Daly, Robin Morgan and other feminists) and passed (though not yet implemented) in Indianapolis. This has fiercely polarised the feminist movement in the US, where other feminists are fighting the legislation in the courts. Those opposing the legislation object to the theoretical analysis behind it, and argue that it reinforces sexist myths about men and women. They point out that women are presented as weak and helpless victims who do not enjoy sex, and that feminist art, erotica, and advice on women's sexuality will be laid open to possible prosecution. The legislation also fails to address sexist representation more generally.[99] That the US judiciary is now deciding the outcome of a dispute within the feminist movement

shows how deeply divisive and destructive the debate and tactics over pornography have become.

More appropriate feminist action would seem to me to involve not the demand for state censorship of pornography but the attempt to understand, analyse and publicly discuss the appeal of pornography, commenting upon and at times taking direct action to remove pornographic and sexist images of the use and abuse of women's bodies primarily for men's titillation. (In some workplaces, for example, feminists have successfully demanded that nude calendar pin-ups of women are removed, stressing that it is not explicit sex but the sexual objectification of women which they find offensive.) And we must also demand that men analyse and tell us why so many men like and 'need' pornography, and that they understand why much of it is offensive to most women, and act on this understanding. (Two male shop stewards from a Direct Labour Department near Birmingham, for example, campaigned successfully in 1979 to remove pin-ups, porn pictures and girlie calendars from all their department's workplaces and sites.)[100] But if our comments are to be instructive and our interventions effective we need to look carefully and critically at the total array, context and packaging of images of women, and of men. For, as Rosalind Coward and others have argued, the offensive codes and meanings of pornography appear as prominently in most of our representational practices:

> This is a primary reason why I think that pornography as such is the wrong object of attack. Unless we refine our ways of talking about sexist codes in general, how they operate and produce their meanings, and why they are offensive, we run the risk of being misunderstood ... Our descriptions of 'sexist', 'offensive' and 'degrading' remain curiously underdeveloped.[101]

Sexism in representation is not reducible to portrayals of explicit sex. And were we to reduce it to what is most obviously sexually titallating, romantic fiction, written by and for women, would seem as suitable a target of feminist analysis, critique and understanding as men's pornography. Here too we find a persistent worship of the strong, the powerful, the phallic male. Its effects could indeed be seen as more insidious, because less explicit. But sexism resides in almost every image of almost every

media production: they are none of them above suspicion. By sexism I mean the presentation of images of women as less than and inferior to men, existing to titillate and service men.

The clean 'family' entertainment in the Oscar-winning film *Terms of Endearment* is, for instance, thoroughly sexist in its presentation of the selfish, narcissistic, immature woman (played by Shirley MacLaine) who puts her own needs first until finally redeemed by a man; she is compared with the selfless, obedient, sacrificial daughter (played by Debra Winger), who exists for her husband and children.[102] This film is at least as strong a backlash against feminist aspirations for autonomy and sexual freedom as *Dressed to Kill*, a film trashed by WAVAW for portraying women as the victims of men.

If our critique of pornography is to be more than the projection and denial of our own anxiety and confusion about sex, feminists will need (as many now have) to take a broader and deeper look at all forms of representation of women. We must, in fact, abandon any radical or revolutionary feminist position which asserts what we need to reject and rejects what we need to assert. We need to reject the idea of there being some inner sexual essence, healthy in women and unhealthy in men. We need to assert that women, too, are full of contradiction and conflict over sexuality. We need to understand the ways in which the prevalence of men's sexual violence is neither simply the product of inner sex drives, nor inner power drives – realisable through the possession of the penis – but rather a product of men's social power in general. Men's subjective sexual needs, complex and contradictory though they are, are inseparable from all the social pressures which construct particular styles of aggressive masculinity.

A number of recent books on sexuality and desire have begun to adopt such approaches.[103] They argue that all sexual practices, whether heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or of any other type of sexual orientation, act or style, are mediated by the historical meanings they acquire from within our dominant social institutions – legal, familial, religious and medical. The maintenance of heterosexual regimes by these institutions creates a narrowness and rigidity in all our notions of sexuality. But it does not prevent either women or men from engaging in the struggle to transform the context, meaning and power relations typically manifest in heterosexual

practice. And it does not prevent the struggle of gay and lesbian people, as well as heterosexuals, to affirm the positive nature of diverse sexualities. As Barbara Ehrenreich has suggested:

> We need to find a way to take gay rights out of the gay ghetto. I want to take it out of being a special interest. I think it is in every person's interest to have their notion of sexuality expanded.[104]

This new North American and British socialist feminist writing of the eighties has begun to focus on the nature of 'desire' and its connections with power, tracing the links back to infancy and our personal histories of pleasure and pain in erotic attachments to others, as well as to the surrounding context and ideologies of male dominance. It argues for an approach which stresses the varieties of sexual pleasure women seek and receive alongside the dangers which stem from many men's violence towards women. Such a perspective rejects any attempt to celebrate one type of sexual practice over others, as more rewarding, more fulfilling, more correct. Undermining the current institutions and social meanings constructing the dominant male and submissive female, as well as the 'natural' and the normal ideologies of heterosexuality, are indeed central struggles for feminist thought and practice today. But, as Jeffrey Weeks has argued, we will need to do this by looking at, and attempting to change, the *context* of sexual relationships, rather than simply focusing on sexual acts themselves.[105]

Although the priority given to rape, pornography and male violence as the explanation of women's subordination has been a dominant public voice of feminism in the eighties, this is only because, as Liz Heron pointed out in 1981, other currents in feminism 'no longer have a voice or a clear identity within the women's movement'.[106] There have been alternative feminist analyses to the radical and revolutionary feminist view of sex, which have been more popular with socialist feminists in Britain and the US. These alternative attempts to explain the connections between sexuality and violence, between sexuality and the assertion of power, draw upon different theoretical frameworks which reject the reductionism and biologism underlying most of the ideas we have looked at in this chapter. The French Lacanian school of thought has been influential within academic feminism, while the American object-relations

school of psychoanalytic thought has been absorbed into a more popular form of feminist thought. In their explanation of sexual difference these psychoanalytically guided theories provide new possibilities and present new problems for feminists attempting to understand the politics of personal life.

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