Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape

Robin Morgan

One of the first feminists to attack pornography back in the 1960's was Robin Morgan. She coined the phrase "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape." It has been used by feminists to point out the convergence of the two ever since. Says Robin, "The following article is based on what to my horror got termed in hard-boiled organizer's jargon 'The Rape Rap.' I must have communicated some version of it hundreds of times, with a ripening anger as women came forward with their own experiences of rape, and I realized how far-reaching and quintessentially patriarchal the crime was. There was a time when rape and pornography were embarrassing issues even in the Women's Movement: Such things were deplorable, to be sure, but they had to be deplored with a sophisticated snicker—not with outspoken fury. Today there are rape-crisis centers in major cities all over the nation, and feminist rape-prevention brigades. Many metropolitan police departments have special anti-rape squads run by women officers and new rape-reporting procedures devised by women; and self-defense classes for women are no longer seen as passing strange. . . . Feminists . . . sorties against the attendant issue—pornography—are still somewhat more awkwardly conducted, but women are every day becoming less concerned with being graceful and more bent on being free."

There is perhaps no subject relevant to women so deliberately distorted as that of rape. This is because rape is the perfected act of male sexuality in a patriarchal culture—it is the ultimate metaphor for domination, violence, subjugation, and possession.*

But the most insidious aspect of rape is the psychological fiction that accompanies it—with which all women are besieged until, for

* This does not mean that men in another cultural context would necessarily be the same, or that all men have acceded to the male sexual standards in this culture. Biological-determination theories will remain treacherous until we have enough feminist scientists to right the current imbalance and bias and create genuinely value-free research.

survival's sake, we even pretend to believe what we know is a lie. The fiction has many versions. We can look at a few representative examples.

There is the Pity the Poor Rapist approach. This version tells us that we must be sorry for our attacker. He is sick, he cannot help himself, he needs help.

He decidedly does need help (if he can be apprehended), but his victim needs it more—and first. She is not even supposed to defend herself for fear of being unwomanly. I find it educative that a woman who, for instance, notices her child being molested by a dirty old (or young) man on the playground, and who shampoos the man with a brick, is considered a proper mother, "the Tigress defending her cubs." Yet should the same man molest her, she ought to, in society's view, welcome him and admit that she relishes being pawed, or if she must, plead winningly with him to stop. It is acceptable to defend one's child, but not one's self because it is considered the epitome of selfishness for the female to place her own concerns first. We are supposed to wipe the noses of all humanity before we dare think about ourselves. Well, we must learn to mother those selves and defend them at least as valiantly as we do our children.

The Spontaneity Lie is an offspring of Pity the Poor Rapist. It informs us that he was just an average guy walking along the street (the lamb) who was positively seized with the urge to attack a woman. Sudden lust. In combating the spontaneity approach, one should remember that more than half of all rapes occur in breaking-and-entering situations—which do require, one would think, a modicum of premeditation.

There is always the basic Every Woman Loves a Rapist/All Women Want to Be Raped/Good Girls Never Get Raped/It's Always the Woman's Fault cliché. This is frequently carried to ludicrous extremes. Thus, if she wears slacks that's obviously meant as a challenge; if a skirt it's an incitement. If she glowers as she strides down the street, it's meant as an attention-getter; if she looks pleasant it's a come-on. Et cetera; ad nauseam; ad infinitum. And, besides, what was she doing out walking all alone by herself anyway at eleven o'clock in broad daylight? Doesn't she know her place?

Knowing our place is the message of rape—as it was for blacks the message of lynchings. Neither is an act of spontaneity or sexuality—they are both acts of political terrorism, designed consciously and unconsciously to keep an entire people in its place by continual reminders. For the attitudes of racism and sexism are twined together in the knot of rape in such a way as to constitute the symbolic ex-
pression of the worst in our culture.* These “reminders” are perpetrated on victims selected sometimes at random, sometimes with particular reason. So we have the senseless rape murders of children and of seventy-year-old women—whom no one can salaciously claim were enticing the rapist—and we also have the deliberate “lesson-rapes” that feminist students have been prey to on their campuses for the past four years—acts based on the theory that all these frustrated feminists need is a good rape to show ’em the light.

Thus, the woman is rarely unknown to her attacker, nor need the rapist be a stranger to his victim—although goddess help her deal with the more-than usual scorn of the police if she reports rape by a former jealous boyfriend, or an ex-husband, or her faculty advisor or boss or psychiatrist. Many policemen already delight in asking the victim such sadistic and illegal questions as, “Did you enjoy it?” Consequently, any admission on her part, whether elicited or volunteered, that the rapist was actually an acquaintance seems to invite open season on her morals.

But radical feminists see the issue of rape as even more pervasive than these examples. For instance, I would define rape not only as the violation taking place in the dark alley or after breaking into and entering a woman’s home. I claim that rape exists any time sexual intercourse occurs when it has not been initiated by the woman out of her own genuine affection and desire. This last qualifier is important because we are familiar with the cigarette commercial of the “Liberated Woman,” she who is the nonexistent product of the so-called sexual revolution: a Madison Avenue-spawned male fantasy of what the liberated woman should be—a glamorous lady slaving with lust for his paunchy body. We also know that many women, in responding to this new pressure to be “liberated initiators,” have done so not out of their own desire but for the same old reasons—fear of losing the guy, fear of being a prude, fear of hurting his fragile feelings, fear. So it is vital to emphasize that when we say she must be the initiator (in tone if not in actuality) we mean because she wants to be. Anything short of that is, in a radical feminist definition, rape. Because the pressure is there, and it need not be a knife blade against the throat; it’s in his body language, his threat of sulking, his clenched or trembling hands, his self-deprecating humor or angry put-down or silent self-pity at being rejected. How many millions of times have women had sex “willingly” with men they didn’t want to have sex with? Even men they loved? How many times have women wished just to sleep instead or read or watch “The Late Show”? It must be clear that, under this definition, most of the decently married bedrooms across America are settings for nightly rape.

This normal, corn-fed kind of rape is less shocking if it can be realized and admitted that the act of rape is merely the expression of the standard, “healthy” even encouraged male fantasy in patriarchal culture—that of aggressive sex. And the articulation of that fantasy into a billion-dollar industry is pornography.

Civil libertarians recoil from linking the issues of rape and pornography, dredging out their yellowing statistics from the Scandinavian countries which appear to show that acts of rape decline where pornography is more easily procured. This actually ought to prove the connection. I am not suggesting that censorship should rule the day here—I abhor censorship in any form (although there was a time when I felt it was a justifiable means to an end—which is always the devil’s argument behind thought control, isn’t it?). I am aware, too, that a phallocentric culture is more likely to begin its censorship purge with books on pelvic self-examination for women, or books containing lyrical paens to lesbianism than with “See Him Tear and Kill Her” or similar Spillane-esque titles. Nor do I place much trust in a male-run judiciary, and I am less than reassured by the character of those who would pretend to judge what is fit for the public to read or view. On the contrary, I feel that censorship often boils down to some male judges sitting up on their benches, getting to read a lot of dirty books with one hand. This hardly appears to me to be the solution. Some feminists have suggested that a Cabinet-level woman in charge of Women’s Affairs (in itself a controversial idea) might take pornography regulation into her portfolio. Others hark back to the idea of community control. Both approaches give me unease, the first because of the unlikelihood that a Cabinet-level woman appointee these days would have genuine feminist consciousness, or, if she did, have the power and autonomy from the administration to act upon it; the second because communities can be as ignorant and totalitarian in censorship as individual tyrants. A lot of education would have to precede community-controlled regulation to win that proposal my paranoid support. Certainly this is one problem to which simple solutions are just nonexistent, rhetoric to the contrary.

But women seem to be moving on the issue with a different strategy, one that circumvents censorship and instead is aimed at hurting the purveyors themselves, at making the business less lucrative by making the clients less comfortable. In one Southern town, women

* Susan Brownmiller has since demonstrated this point in depth, with courage and clarity, in her book Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1975).
planned their action with considerable wit; they took up positions on their local porn strip and politely photographed each man as he entered or left the bookstores and movie houses. They used a very obvious camera—the large, newspaper-photographer type—sometimes chasing the man for a block as he fled in chagrin. One group of women who used this tactic deliberately worked with cameras that had no film—scaring and embarrassing the men was their aim. Another group, however, did use film and developed the shots. They then made up Wanted Posters of the men, which they plastered all over town—to the acute humiliation of the porn-purchasers, some of whom turned out to be influential and upstanding citizens of the community. In Seattle women's anti-pornography squads have stink-bombed smut bookstores—and the local papers were filled with approving letters to the editors. In New York three porn movie houses have been fire-bombed.

The massive porn industry grinds on, of course. In a replay of the liberated-woman shill, we are now being sold so-called female-oriented pornography, as if our sexuality were as imitative of patriarchal man's as Playgirl is of Playboy. It must be frustrating to the pushers of such tacky trash to realize that for most women Wuthering Heights is still a real turn-on, or that there are quite a few of us who remained loyal to Ashley Wilkes (especially as portrayed by Leslie Howard) and never were fooled by that gross Rhett Butler. Yet pornography today is becoming chic—serious movie houses, which usually run art films, are now cashing in on so-called art-porn. The Mick Jagger/sadism fad, the popularity of transvestite entertainers, and the resurgence of “Camp” all seem to me part of an unmistakable backlash against what feminists have been demanding. It is no coincidence that FBI statistics indicate the incidence of rape increased 93 percent in the 1960's. When people refuse to stay in their place, the message must be repeated in a louder tone.

And what is this doing to us? We are somewhat educated now as to the effects of rape on women, but we know much less about the effects of pornography. Some obvious trends can be noted: the market for go-go girls, nude models, and porno-film “actresses,” which in turn affects women's employment (why be a secretary when you can make more money taking off your clothes?); the overlapping boundaries of the porn and prostitution industries; the erosion of the virgin/whore stereotypes to a new “all woman are really whores” attitude, thus erasing the last vestige of (even corrupted) respect for women; the promotion of infidelity and betrayal as a swinging alternative to committed relationships. But how to chart the pressure

sensed by women from their boyfriends or husbands to perform sexually in ever more objectified and objectifying fashion as urged by porn movies and magazines? How to connect the rise of articles in journals aimed at educated, liberal audiences—articles extolling the virtues of anal intercourse, “fist-fucking,” and other “kinky freedoms”?†

But how far-reaching is the effect, how individual, how universal? Individual in terms of the specific humiliation felt by the woman whose husband hides Penthouse or some harder-core version of it in the bathroom and then forces himself on her at night—or on other women when she fends him off—and then blames her for her frigidity and his inconstancy? Individual and universal enough to explain the recent horrifying rise in the rate of marital violence? (See Del Martin's definitive book Battered Wives, San Francisco: Glide Urban Center Publications, 1976.) Universal enough to have influenced all of twentieth-century theology?

Yet this has happened, through the work of that intellectual giant, the Christian theologian Paul Tillich—he who is revealed to us with such compassion but uncompromising honesty by his widow in her brilliant, controversial book From Time to Time (New York: Stein & Day, 1973). After his death, Hannah Tillich tells us, she “unlocked the drawers. All the girls' photos fell out, letters and poems, passionate appeal and disgust.” There was the pornographic letter hidden under his blotter; the knowledge of his favorite fantasy of naked women, crucified, being whipped; the discovery of all the affairs, the mistresses, the sexual secretaries, the one-night stands, the abuse of the worshipful female students who had sat at his feet, his “houri . . . tinkling their chains.” She writes: “I was tempted to place between the sacred pages of his highly esteemed lifework these obscene signs of the real life that he had transformed into the gold of abstraction—King Midas of the spirit.” Instead, Hannah Tillich dared write a book about herself, alchemizing her own integrity out of “the piece of bleeding, tormented womanhood” she says she had become.

So we can admit that pornography is sexist propaganda, no more and no less. [There is no comparison here with genuine erotic art—such as The Tale of Genji by Lady Shikibu Murasaki (c. 978–1031 A.D.), the great Japanese novelist of the Heian period.]

Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice. And what a

† Surely the currently (1976) popular "Punk Image" of the half-gangster, half-fifties-high-school-dropout male is related to these themes, an image described in The Village Voice as bringing back "masculine chic."
practice. The violation of an individual woman is the metaphor for man's forcing himself on whole nations (rape as the crux of war), on nonhuman creatures (rape as the lust behind hunting and related carnage), and on the planet itself (reflected even in our language—carving up "virgin territory," with strip-mining often referred to as a "rape of the land"). Elaine Morgan, in her book The Descent of Woman (New York: Stein & Day, 1972), posits that rape was the initial crime, not murder, as the Bible would have it. She builds an interesting scientific argument for her theory. In The Mothers (1927; New York: Grosset & Dunlap Universal Library edition, 1963), Robert Briffault puts forward much the same hypothesis for an evolutionary "fall" from the comparable grace of the animal realm; his evidence is anthropological and mythohistoric. In more than one book, Claude Lévi-Strauss has pursued his complex theory of how men use women as the verbs by which they communicate with one another (they themselves are the nouns, of course), rape being the means for communicating defeat to the men of a conquered tribe, so overpowered that they cannot even defend "their" woman from the victors. That theory, too, seems relevant here. The woman may serve as a vehicle for the rapist expressing his rage against a world which gives him pain—because he is poor, or oppressed, or mad, or simply human. Then what of her? We have waded in the swamp of compassion for him long enough. It is past time we stopped him.

The conflict is escalating now because we won't cast our glances down any more to avoid seeing the degrading signs and marquees. We won't shuffle past the vulgarity of the sidewalk verbal hassler, who is not harmless but who is broadcasting the rapist's theory and who is backed up by the threat of the capacity to carry out the practice itself. We will no longer be guilty about being victims of ghastly violations on our spirits and bodies merely because we are female. Whatever their age and origin, the propaganda and act which transform that most intimate, vulnerable, and tender of physical exchanges into one of conquest and humiliation is surely the worse example patriarchy has to offer women of the way it truly regards us.