

crucial necessity. It's fatally easy in the heat of the moment to forget what feminist theory is—after all, the patriarchy gives us plenty of help on this point! Please don't think I offer you the following essays as illustrations of accurate theory; most of them (except for "Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement") now seem to me more warnings—go thou and do otherwise!—than examples.

But I may be too hard on my past self. You decide.

—November, 1984

NOTES

1. Spender, Dale. *Women of Ideas and what Men Have Done to Them* (London/Boston: 1982), Routledge & Kegan Paul [Ark].
2. Gage, Matilda Joslyn. *Women, Church, and State* (Chicago: 1873), Charles Kerr. Reprinted by Persephone Press, 1980, Watertown, MA.
3. Jennifer Macleod, *The Village Voice*, February 11, 1971.
4. For example, it can be argued that commercial pornography for women exists. The feminist point of view would examine the cultural myths in such pornography (e.g. Rosemary Rogers' novels) and find whether the *same* myth of male hegemony were being sold to both sexes.
5. Chesler, Phyllis. *About Men* (N.Y.: 1978) Simon & Schuster.

Not For Years But For Decades

I. FACT

WHEN I WAS TWELVE I FELL IN LOVE WITH DANNY KAYE. FOR almost a quarter of a century I have regarded that crush as the beginning of my sexual life. But "sexual" is a dangerous word precisely because it splits one part of experience off from the rest. It was only when I began to ask, not about "sex" or my "sex life" but (more vaguely) about my "feelings" and about "emotional attachments" that I began to recall other things, some earlier, that the official classifications of "sex" censored out and made unimportant. Perhaps that's the function of official classifications. Names are given to things by the privileged and their naming is (wouldn't you think?) to their own advantage, but in the area of sexuality women are emphatically not a privileged class. So let's ask about "friends."

At eleven I played erotic games with girl friends, acting out nominally heterosexual stories I (usually) had made up. One script (minus the kissing and touching we added to it) I showed my mother, who praised it but laughed until she cried at one stage direction, which has a lover climbing a rope ladder to his sweetheart's window, being discovered by her parents, and gloomily exiting by climbing back down the ladder. About this time I went on my First Date with a nice, plain, gentle, thoroughly dull little boy called Bill (we called him "Bill the Hill"). The necking he wanted to do bored me, but I was tremendously proud of having a First Date. At about that time, one winter's evening, one of my girl friends seductively and skittishly insisted on kissing us all good night; that night I dreamed I was being led further and further into a dark forest by an elf who was neither a girl nor a boy, rotting oranges as big as people hung on the trees, and when a storm began, I woke in terror, knowing perfectly well that I had dreamed about my friend and that I was feeling for her what ought to go on with Bill the Hill. I told my mother about it and she "handled it very well" (as my analyst said many years later).

She said it was "a stage."

That summer I was in summer camp and all the twelve-year-old girls in the bunk necked and petted secretly (with each other) but the next summer everybody seemed to have forgotten about it. Certainly nobody mentioned it. Everybody remembered the "dirty jokes" we had told every night for hours (grotesquely heterosexual or homophobic stories I thought the other children had invented) and none of my friends had forgotten the (heterosexual) serial stories I had made up and which several other little girls continued. But that whole summer of fumbling with your best friend had become invisible. Since nobody else mentioned it, I never did either.

My "best friend" was Carol-Ellen. I called her my "best

friend," not my "lover." I had strong and sometimes painfully profound feelings about her and would have been miserably jealous if she'd preferred anyone else to me. Yet I never thought that I "loved" Carol-Ellen or that what we did was really "sex" (although it was somehow not only sex, but a far worse kind than the boys' panty-raids or girls staying out with boys after curfew). I never gave to what had happened between us the prestigious name of "love" (which might have led me to stand up for its importance) or the wicked-but-powerful name of "sex." What I had begun to learn (in "it's a stage") continued that summer, that my real experience, undefined and powerful as it was, didn't really exist. It was bad and it didn't exist. It was bad *because* it didn't exist.

Simultaneously with being mad about Carol-Ellen, I read Love Comics. I believed in them. (Everybody read them and everybody, I suspect, believed in them.) Like dating and movies and boys, they were about real love and real sex. I remember disliking them and at the same time not being able to stay away from them. They demanded things of me (looks, clothes, behavior) which I disliked, and they insisted on the superiority and importance of men in a way I detested (and couldn't connect with any of the little boys I knew at camp). But they offered a very great promise: that if only I would sacrifice my ambitions and most of my personality, I would be given a reward—they called it "love." I knew it was in some way "sexual." And yet I also knew that those hearts and flowers and flashing lights when the characters kissed didn't have anything to do with sex; they were supersex or ultrasex; they were some kind of transcendent ecstasy beyond ordinary life. They certainly didn't have anything to do with masturbation, or with what Carol-Ellen and I were secretly doing together. I think now that the most attractive rewards held out by the Love Comics (and later by the movies, the books, and the psychoana-

lysts) was freedom from responsibility and hence freedom from the burdens of being an individual. At twelve I found that promise very attractive. I was a tall, overly-bright and overly-self-assertive girl, too much so to fit anybody's notions of femininity (and too bookish and odd to fit other children's ideas of an acceptable human being). If anybody needed an escape from the guilt of individuality, I certainly did. The Love Comics told me that when it came right down to it, I wasn't any different from any other woman and that once love came, I would no longer have to worry about being imprisoned in my lonely, eccentric selfhood. The hearts and flowers and the psychedelic flashing lights would sweep all that away. I would be "in love" and I would never have to think again, never agonize over being "unpopular," never follow my own judgment in the face of criticism, never find things out for myself. This is the Grand Inquisitor's promise and I think Germaine Greer is quite right to see in the cult of "romance" a kind of self-obliterating religion. I didn't know that at twelve, of course. Nor did I know enough to look at the comic books' copyright pages to see which sex owned them, published them, and even wrote them. But I believed. And if I hadn't gotten the message from comic books, I would still have gotten it (as I did later) from movies, books, and friends. Later on I would get the same message from several (not even one!) psychiatrists and psychology books. Nor did the High Culture I met at college carry a different message. The insistence on certain kinds of looks and behavior, the overwhelming importance of men, and the sacrifice of personality and individuality (as well as the promised rewards) were always the same. (The only thing college added was contempt for women – which didn't change the obligation to be "feminine.")

Ti-Grace Atkinson calls this the heterosexual institution. Time passed. Carol-Allen went to another camp. At four-

teen I felt for a male counselor of nineteen the vulnerability, awkwardness, and liking I've since learned to call "erotic tension." Somebody else asked him to the Sadie Hawkins Dance and I cried in the bathroom for three solid minutes. I didn't know him well and didn't feel for him with one-quarter of the intensity I had for Carol-Allen, but this time I had an official name for what I was feeling; I called it "love." I think what drew me to him was his kindness and his lack of good looks, which made him seem, to me, like a fellow-refugee. He was embarrassed at the dance (about me, I suspect) and roared about, clowning, which disillusioned me. I don't believe Carol-Allen could have disillusioned me; I knew her too well and she was too important to me. I don't remember his face or his name, although I remember Carol-Allen's perfectly (possibly because I took good care to get a snapshot of her). And Carol-Allen, though of course a fellow-creature, was not a fellow-refugee; she always seemed to me far too good-looking and personally successful for that, so much so that I wondered why nobody else noticed her beauty. I always felt graced by Carol-Allen's picking me for her best friend; after all, she could've been friends with anybody. But somewhere in my feelings about Bernie (Sidney? Joe? Scottie?) was the disheartening feeling I came to recognize later in my dealings with men: *He'll do.*

The year before that, in junior high, an older boy of fifteen (a popular person whose acquaintance I coveted) complimented me on a scarf I was wearing and I responded as we always did in my family: "Thanks, I got it at. . . ." He laughed, partly amused, partly critical. "I didn't ask you where you got it! After all, I'm not going to get one." I knew that I had made a social mistake, and yet my embarrassment and shame were mixed with violent resentment. I knew then that the manners I had been taught (they seemed to me perfectly good ones) were now wrong, and that I would have to learn a whole new set for "boys." It was unfair. It

was just like the Love Comics. I knew also that somewhere deep down I didn't believe in the absolute duality of male and female behavior (in terms of which he'd criticized me) and that somewhere in the back of my mind, in a reserve of boundless arrogance, I was preparing revolutionary solutions for such people: *That's false and I know it. And just you wait.*

Yet all of this: revolution, Lesbianism, what-have-you, took place in profound mental darkness. I wrote moody Lesbian poems about Carol-Ellen, played with the idea of being a Lesbian, a tremendously attractive idea but strictly a literary one (I told myself). I wrote a Lesbian short story, which worried my high school teacher into asking me if I had any "problems you want to talk about." I knew the story had bothered him and felt wickedly pleased and very daring. The story itself was about a tall, strong, masculine, dark-haired girl (me) who falls in love with a short, slender, light-haired girl (?) and then kills herself by throwing herself off a bridge because the light-haired girl (although a Lesbian) will have nothing to do with her. I couldn't imagine anything else for the two of them to do. A few months later I began a novel (without connecting it with the story): here the dark-haired girl has become a dark-haired young man and the two lovers do get together (here I *could* imagine something for them to do) although light-hair eventually breaks the love affair off. On what grounds? That she's a Lesbian! The young man, by the way, does not kill himself.

At the same time I began to wonder what pregnancy felt like and to write poems about Being Female, which I thought meant having no mind and being immersed in some overwhelming, not necessarily pleasant experience which was much bigger than you were (no, I didn't yet even know that D.H. Lawrence existed; it was Love Comics again). I fell in love with a male gay friend and went with him and his sister to the Village, where they adjured me to pretend I

was eighteen ("For God's sake, Joanna, put your hair up and wear earrings!") so that we could drink real liquor in a real bar. I had disturbing dreams about him in which he came to the door of my family's house in a dress and a babushka. (At the time I interpreted the dream as worry about his effeminate mannerisms. Now I'm not so sure.) Later, in my first year of college, he came to visit and I teased him into kissing me; it felt so good that the next day I insisted on going farther. The only place we could use was the dormitory lounge, and possibly because of the publicity of the location, things turned out badly; he got scared, I got nauseated, and after he left I spent a wretched hour surrounded by friends, who cheerfully told me that the first time was always rotten. The housemother, a youngish psychologist, told me the same thing, and when I told her about my feelings for women (I must've had them, although I can only remember telling her about them) she said I was "going through a stage."

Somehow, in a vague and confused way, I didn't believe that. I found *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, a nineteenth-century novel in which a woman disguises herself as a man and has a love affair with a woman and a man (I thought the man was a creep and was really only interested in the woman). I wore slacks and felt defiant and ashamed. I tried to find out about Lesbianism on campus and annoyed my friends ("This school is awful. Do you know there are Lesbians here?" "Where! Where!" "Oh, Joanna, *really*."). I acquired a "best friend" for whom I had painful, protective, profound feelings &c. without ever recognizing &c. I found another "elf" and followed her around campus at a distance, feeling embarrassed. I went out on dates, which were even more crucial than they had been in high school, and got kissed by various men, which mildly excited and not-so-mildly disgusted me. My "best friend" told me stories about Lesbianism in her high school, in which everyone was a Lesbian except her,

but when I wanted to go with her to a Lesbian bar in New York (over vacation) she wouldn't, and when I desperately asked her to pretend we were lovers in front of a third person, whom I said I wanted to shock (I didn't know myself at that point exactly what I was doing) she got very angry and upset.

So I gave up. It wasn't real. It didn't count, except in my own inner world in which I could not only love women but also fly, ride the lightning, be Alexander the Great, live forever, etc., all of which occurred in my poetry. I regarded this inner life as both crucially important and totally trivial, the source of all my vitality and yet something completely sealed off from "reality." By now I had learned to define the whole cluster of feelings as "wanting to be a man" (something I had not thought of before college), and saw it simultaneously as a shameful neurotic symptom and an indication of how much more talented and energetic I was than other women. Women with "penis envy" (another collegiate enlightenment) were inferior to men but were somehow superior to other women although they were also wickeder than other women. My best friend thought so. The psychology books my mother read thought so. The movies seemed to think so. Two years later the second elf turned up one summer (we had become distant friends) and the whole business started all over again. I now recognized it as a recurrent thing. I laughed at it and called it "penis envy." It was about at that time that I began the first of a long series of one-way infatuations with very macho men (these lasted into my thirties), agonizing experiences in which I suffered horribly but had the feeling that my life had become real and intense, even super-real, the feeling that I was being propelled into an experience bigger and more overwhelming than my own dreary life, a life I was beginning to detest. The first man I picked for this was my "best friend's" fiance. I kept the infatuation going, totally unre-

ciprocated, for almost a year. He left school, they split up. I managed to go out with him once (we necked) and felt, in immense erotic excitement, that if only he would love me I could submerge my individuality in his, that he was a "real man," and that if I could only marry him I could give up "penis envy" and be a "real woman."

It sounds just like Love Comics.

In high school I believed (along with my few friends) that college would see an end to the dating game, to the belief that women were inferior to men, and that intellectual women were freaks. But it was in college that I first got lectures about "being a woman" from boys I knew, and heard other women getting them, heard that so-and-so knew "how to be a woman," and was surrounded by the new and ghastly paraphernalia of dress rules and curfews. (My parents had been extremely permissive about where I went and with whom.)

After my twelfth summer I had gone (very early) into a high school where I knew nobody; I became depressed. In college I became more depressed. I went to the school psychiatrist, who told me I had "penis envy" and was in love with my father. I was willing to agree but did not know what to do about it (he said, "Enjoy life. Go out on dates") and became even more depressed. By the end of graduate school I no longer had problems with "feelings about women"; I felt nothing about anybody. Occasionally I slept with a short, gentle, retiring man for whom I felt affection but no desire; puzzlingly, the sex didn't work. Later, when I got into my twenties and into psychoanalysis, and began to feel again, I "fell in love with" handsome macho men who didn't know I existed; I hated and envied them. The more intense and unreal these one-way "love affairs" were, the more dead and flat my life became in between. (When the man was not inaccessible, I made sure I was.) I got married to a short, gentle, retiring pleasant man (*He'll do*) and

worked very hard at sex, which I loathed. I fell in love with a male homosexual friend because he was so beautiful and his life was beautiful and I wanted to be part of his life. I certainly didn't want to be part of my own life. I acquired a series of office jobs, none of which I could bear to keep ("Isn't there anything you like about your job?" "Yes, lunch hour."). I went into analysis because I was extremely depressed and very angry, and when my analyst asked (once) if I had homosexual feelings, I said "Oh, no, of course not," without even thinking. Even if it hadn't been nonsense, everybody knew that the real problem was men, so I thought endlessly about men, worried about men, worried (with the active help of my analyst) about the orgasms I wasn't having with men, worried about my childhood, worried about my parents, all in the service of worrying about my relation to men. Nothing else mattered. When my analyst asked me if I enjoyed sex, apart from orgasm, I remember wondering mildly what on earth he meant. It's quite possible that analysis did help me with my "dependency problems," although for a man who urged me to be independent, he was remarkably little concerned at my being economically dependent on my husband; he thought that was O.K. I didn't; for one thing my husband hated his job as much as I hated mine. He told me that my relationship with my mother was bad (I agreed) but when I talked about my father I would get so enraged (about all men, not just about that one) that he would become tolerantly silent and then tell me I was showing resistance. He once said that if I'd been born a boy, I could've turned out much worse: "You might have been homosexual." He said that what had saved me from going really crazy in my childhood was my father's love. He once remarked that I had intense friendships, and I said, "Yeah, I guess," not at all interested. But apart from the two remarks I've noted we never talked about my homosexuality. We talked about my "frigidity."

I remember someone in the group (I was in group therapy for years) asking me if my husband was a good lover, and my absolute, blank helplessness before that question. I remember analytic remarks that enraged and baffled me: that getting married showed "ego strength"—I had done it partly because I was running out of money and couldn't stand working, a motive of which I was bitterly ashamed and which I never told anybody; that it was surprising that my husband could "function sexually"—I had an impulse of absolute rage, which I suppressed; that I was afraid I would be physically hurt in the sex act—"No, I'm afraid I'll turn into a 'real woman'," "But you are a real woman"; that I could be "active" by telling my husband what to do to me; and that men and women had different social functions but the same dignity—"Yeah, separate but equal" and that one I actually said out loud.

If analysis did any good, it certainly did not do it in the area of sex. Perhaps having some stories published helped. Being invited to writers' conferences and, for the first time in my life, meeting people like myself helped. (Question: why is it so hard making friends in group therapy and so easy making friends at writers' conferences? Answer: because writers are crazy.) Years later when I heard the phrase "the iron has entered your soul" I entirely misunderstood it. I thought that when you passed a certain point in misery you could really take the misery into you and turn it into strength. Perhaps I did that somehow. I made the first genuine decision of my adult life and left my husband—I was panic-stricken, clearly a matter of "dependency problems" but also a matter of getting out of the heterosexual institution. I got a job I liked, partly by accident ("You mean they'll pay me for *that*?"). I learned to drive. I got a job in another city and left analysis. I was desperately lonely. I kept "falling in love" with inaccessible men until it occurred to me that I wanted to be them, not

love them, but by then feminism had burst over all of us. I stopped loving men ("It's just too difficult!") and in a burst of inspiration, dreamed up the absolutely novel idea of loving women. I thought at the time that my previous history had nothing to do with it.

Just before I left my husband I had a dream, which I still remember. (I had begun to have nightmares every night after we made love.)¹ I was alone in a city at night, walking round and round a deserted and abandoned schoolhouse, and I couldn't tell if I was frightened because I was alone or frightened because I wasn't alone. This dark schoolhouse was surrounded by uncut grass and grass was growing in the cracks of the sidewalk. I sat down on the front steps, in a world unutterably desolate and deserted, wishing very hard for someone to take me away from there. Then a car, containing the shadowy figures of a man and a woman in the front seat, pulled up, and I got inside, in the back seat. The car began to move and somehow I strained to keep it moving, for I suspected it wasn't going anywhere; and then I looked down and there, through the floorboards, grew the grass.

There was no car. I was back on the steps, alone, And I was terrified.

It was years before the phrase "grass growing in the streets" connected itself to the dream. (I knew from the first that it was about being alone.) I think now that the deserted schoolhouse is psychoanalysis (where I am to be "taught" what to be), and that the shadowy man and woman are what psychoanalysis is teaching me; that is, the heterosexual institution. But the schoolhouse is dark and deserted, grass grows in the streets (as was supposed to happen in the 1930s here if that radical, Roosevelt, won), the man and woman are only shadows, and I'm totally alone in a solitary world. Marriage is an illusion. My "teacher" is nonexistent.

It seems to me now the only dream I've ever had, aside from (a possible) one in childhood, that's genuinely schizophrenic, with the changelessness of madness, the absolute desolation, and the complete lack of hope.

But it didn't happen. Instead I got out.

II. FANTASY

But now we reach problems. Am I a "real" Lesbian?

There is immense social pressure in our culture to imagine a Lesbian as someone who never under any circumstances feels any attraction to any man, in fantasy or otherwise. The popular model of homosexuality is simply the heterosexual institution reversed; since heterosexuality is (supposedly) exclusive, so must homosexuality be. It is this assumption, I think, that lies behind arguments about what a "real Lesbian" is or accusations that so-and-so isn't "really" a Lesbian. I have been attracted to men; therefore I'm not a Lesbian. I have few (or no) fantasies about women and do have fantasies about men;² therefore I'm not a Lesbian. This idea of what a Lesbian is is a wonderful way of preventing anyone from ever becoming one; and when we adopt it, we're simply doing the culture's dirty work for it. *There are no "real" Lesbians*—which is exactly what I heard for years, there are only neurotics, impostors, crazy virgins, and repressed heterosexuals. You aren't a Lesbian. You can't be a Lesbian. There aren't any Lesbians. Real Lesbians have horns.

Since we are outside the culture's definitions to begin with, most of us are not going to fit the culture's models of "sex," not even backwards. There is the Romantic Submission model for women. There is the Consumption Performance model for men. A few years ago *Playboy* came out with a cover made up of many small squares, each of which contained a picture of part of a naked woman: a single breast, a belly, a leg, two buttocks, &c. There were no faces. I had just come out at this time, and was very upset and confused because I couldn't respond to this model. Not only wasn't I relating to women that way; I hated the model itself because I had spent so much time on the other end of it and I knew what that detachable-parts business does to a woman's sense of self. Did this mean that I was not a Lesbian? Not by *Playboy's* standards, certainly. Mind you, I was not therefore a healthy or good woman. I was merely sick, criminal, or crazy. Oddly enough, I don't think I've ever felt guilty about sleeping with women per se; I always felt that my real crime was *not sleeping with men*. After the first euphoria of discovery ("Joanna, for Heaven's sake will you lower your voice; do you want the whole restaurant to know?") what plagued me—and still does—is the nagging feeling that in not sleeping with men I am neglecting a terribly important obligation. I'm sometimes attracted to men I humanly like; when this happens I feel tremendously pressured to do something about it (whether I want to or not). When I don't act on it, I feel cowardly and selfish, just as I used to feel when I didn't have orgasms with my husband. Women, after all, *don't count*. What happens between women *isn't real*. That is, you can't be beaten up on for more than twenty-five years and not carry scar tissue.

Unfortunately there is something we all do that perpetuates the whole business, and that is treating fantasy as a direct guide to action. Suppression doesn't only affect behavior; it also affects the meaning and valuation we give

behavior. And it affects fantasy. The popular view is that daydreams or other fantasies are fairly simple substitutes for behavior and that the two are related to each other in a simple one-to-one way, *i.e.* what you can't act out, you daydream. I don't believe this. For years I did, and was sure that my heterosexual fantasies indicated I was a heterosexual. (My Lesbian fantasies, however, could be dismissed as "wanting to be a man.") I think now that fantasy, like any other language, must be interpreted, that it does not "translate" simply into behavior, and that what is most important about it is the compromise it shows and the underlying subject-matter at work in it. For example, fantasies about "sex" may not be about sex at all, although the energy that feeds them is certainly sexual. I know that in growing up I had fantasies about rescuing Danny Kaye from pirates at the same time that I loved Carol-Allen. I couldn't find my fantasy of a gentle, beautiful, non-masculine, rescuable man in any of the little boys I knew; there was only dull Bill (*He'll do*) and the creeps I hated and feared who grabbed me at parties or came up to me in assembly and said, "Baby, your pants are showing." By the age of fifteen I was having two kinds of fantasies: either I was an effeminate, beautiful, passive man being made love to by another man or I was a strong, independent, able, active, handsome woman disguised as a man (sometimes a knight in armor) who rescued another woman from misery or danger in a medieval world I could not picture very well. The first kind of daydream was full of explicit sex and secret contempt; the second was full of emotion and baffled yearning. Whenever it came time to go beyond the first kiss, I was stopped by my own ignorance. There was a third daydream, rarer than the other two, in which I was an independent, able, strong woman disguised as a man and traveling with my lover, an able, strong man who alone knew the secret of my identity. This kind was not satisfying, either

emotionally or sexually, and I think I tried it out of a sense of duty; the one virtue it had was a sort of hearty palship that I liked.

In a sexual situation there are at least two factors operating: who you want the other person to be and who you want to be yourself. If I try to analyze my own past fantasies, I come up with one theme over and over, and that is not who the Other is, but what kind of identity I can have within the confines of the heterosexual institution. What I'll call the Danny Kaye fantasy is William Steig's *Dreams of Glory* with the sexes changed: little boy saves beautiful adult woman from fate worse than something-or-other. (If you look at the early Kaye films, you find that something of the sort is indeed happening, although not nearly to the extent I thought when I was twelve.) I still think that if I had emerged at puberty into a female-dominant culture in which little girls could reasonably dream of rescuing handsome, gentle, sexually responsive (but non-initiating) men from peril, I could have made an uneasy peace with it. I would probably have ended up the way a good many men do within the heterosexual institution: homosexuality for them remains an area of profound uneasiness, although their outward behavior and what they allow themselves to feel matches the norm.³ However, even the cultural artifacts that turned me on in my youth all took it back in the end, just as Mae West's wooing of Cary Grant in *She Done Him Wrong* is shown up as a fake in the end of the film; he's really a tough cop. In fact, though this model of sexuality is not totally inconceivable and unspeakable, it turns up rarely and is explicitly disallowed. The sixties produced it in grotesque form in Tiny Tim; it took the seventies to produce David Bowie. But the heterosexual institution is wary of this model; it's politically very dangerous. And heterosexual men are trained to avoid it like the plague. Even as a fantasy it disappeared early in my adolescence.

Fantasy Number Two was cued off at age fifteen or thereabouts by something I read, and later on there were movies about Oscar Wilde and so on. (I have never ceased to be amazed at the fact that works about male homosexuality can exist in libraries, quite respectably bound, some even minor classics. They're few enough but Lesbian works are far fewer.) The one film I hoped would be about Lesbianism (*Maedchen in Uniform*) wasn't and disappointed me very much. This fantasy got more and more important as I got older, more depressed, and more outwardly conforming to the heterosexual institution. There were years in my twenties when this was the only way I could daydream about sex at all. I had, by that time, put into this fantasy all the explicit fucking that never got into the others, I'll give you all the passivity and charm you want . . . if only I'm not a woman.

Number Three (woman/woman) began early; it was modeled on a (totally sexless) parodic little story by Mark Twain about a woman disguised as a man, entitled "A Medieval Romance." At fifteen I added material from *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. For close to a decade my knowledge of Lesbianism was limited to these two fictions, one of them a parody (I was too naive to spot this at twelve), and although the emotional tenacity of this fantasy has been awesome, I never put much "sex" into it. I did not, after all, know what women did with each other.⁴ And since the only way I could get near a woman was to disguise myself as a man, I had to protect my disguise (otherwise she wouldn't want me). So it was all impossible. Also, I was uneasy about wanting anybody else to "be the girl," since I knew what a rotten deal that was; I couldn't imagine anybody choosing it voluntarily. And how dull she was! But because I was a sort-of-a-man I couldn't very well love anybody else. Lesbianism modeled on the heterosexual institution didn't work and I had not the dimmest social clue that any other form of it could exist. And in my heart I

think I would infinitely have preferred the reality of loving a woman to any fantasy; the very fact that it was a fantasy used to make me cry (in the fantasy). So this daydream also dies eventually.

The woman-disguised-as-a-man with a man was a pale one; it was too close to the reality of the heterosexual institution. Male attire is a flimsy protection for the culturally harassed female ego. I used this one rarely.

A fantasy that appeared sporadically through my teens and (like the male homosexual fantasy) got heavy in my twenties was explicit heterosexual masochism.⁵ It was physically exciting, erotically dependable, and very upsetting emotionally. I never connected this one to Love Comics and never imagined that it might have social sources; I thought I had invented it, that it meant I was a "real woman" and "really passive," and also that I wanted to be hurt and that I was crazy.

There were two situations I never used in any of my fantasies: a woman loving a man and a man loving a woman. That is, I could never imagine myself in either role of the heterosexual institution. I think now that the heterosexual-masochistic fantasy was a way of sexualizing the situation I was in fact in, and that one of the things it "means" (in translation) is that I was being hurt and I knew that I was being hurt *because* I was a woman, that it was not sexual at all (as I had been promised) but that I wished to goodness it would be; then at least I would get something out of it. I also suspect that sadomasochism is a way of preventing genuine involvement; either he wasn't emotionally there and present or I wasn't, and anyhow *the only thing* I can get from all of this is an orgasm.

The one cultural cue I had in abundance was the Dominance/Submission model of the heterosexual institution. The one cultural cue I barely had at all was Lesbianism (there is no cultural vocabulary of words, images, or expect-

tations in this area). Oddly enough, for someone who thought she "wanted to be a man," I never imagined myself a man at all; by what sheer cussedness I managed to resist that cue, I'll never know.

What do people do with their sexuality? Whatever they can, I think. I think fucking can "work" within a wide variety of physical conditions. And the head-trips may not be connected to what one responds to in real life at all. In a fine essay on female sexuality Linda Phelps says that female sexuality is "schizophrenic, relating not to ourselves as self-directed persons, not to our partners as sexual objects of our desire, but to a false world of symbols and fantasy. . . . It is a world whose eroticism is defined in terms of female powerlessness, dependency, and submission. . . . In a male world, female sexuality is from the beginning unable to get a clear picture of itself." She says also that many women "have no sexual fantasies at all" and those who do "often have the same sadomasochistic fantasies that men do."⁶

Yeah.

Looking back, I think my fantasies were desperate strategies to salvage something of my identity, even at the expense of any realistically possible sexuality. There was, of course, this behavior with women that I wanted but I couldn't talk about that; it was the most taboo of all. (My first incredulous words at thirty-three: "You mean that's *real*?" Yes, I knew it happened, but. . . .) I recognized my Lesbian feelings at age eleven; less than a year later I could no longer even recognize *what I was actually doing*, let alone what I later wanted to do. The only remotely positive encouragement I got, as well as the only analysis or naming, was the "stage" business. So partly I hung on in a muddled way and partly I gave up; after sixteen I gave up completely. The non-verbal messages were too strong. I think that anyone trying to maintain behavior important to them in the face of massive social pressure can only do so in a crip-

pled and compromised way (especially in isolation), whatever form the crippling takes, whether it's guilt or an inability to fantasize or an inability to act. Or perhaps a constant re-shuffling of the roles prescribed by the heterosexual institution. As I got older things got worse; in my twenties I began to have occasional night dreams in which I was physically a man. I dreamed that a bunch of men was running after a bunch of women with felonious intent. I dreamed that I was being unmasked as "not really a man" and that everyone was laughing at me. As I had progressed from college to the less sheltered graduate school and from there to the not-at-all-sheltered job market my situation became worse and worse. I wasn't a man (let alone a homosexual man). I certainly couldn't love women, I was a *woman* and *women* loved *men* and dull, gentle men weren't "really" men and if I liked them I wasn't "really" a woman (and anyhow I didn't like them except as friends; sex with them was no good). I was out of college now, I had to earn my own living, I had to get married, I had to shape up and have orgasms, this was the *real world*, dammit.

So I read Genet and Gide (I scorned *The Well of Loneliness* which I came to much too late anyway) and believed that art and life were totally separate. By then I really did want to be a man (for one thing, men didn't have such horrible lives, or so the heterosexual institution informed me). I was married. I was frigid. I couldn't earn my own living. I wasn't sure I was a writer. Psychoanalysis seemed only to prove more and more that the impossibility of my ever being a "real" woman was my own fault. I was hopelessly crazy and a failure at everything. My analyst, in the kindest possible way, pointed out to me that my endless infatuations with inaccessible men were not realistic; I tried to tell him that for me nothing was realistic. My maneuvers for retaining some shred of autonomy within the iron-and-concrete prison of the heterosexual institution were getting

desperate; they now involved wholesale transformations of identity or the direct translation of my real situation into "masochism," which terrified and disgusted me. (I only brought myself to write about these fantasies many years later, by which time they had lost much of their glamor.) I knew that I did not really want to sleep with men. But that was sick. I did want to sleep with men—but only in my head and only under very specialized circumstances. *That* was sick. In short I had—for close to twenty-five years—no clear sexual identity at all, no confidence in my own bodily experience, and no pleasure in lovemaking with any real person. I had to step out of the heterosexual institution before I could put myself back together and begin to recover my own bodily and emotional experience. When I did, it was only because the women's movement had thoroughly discredited the very idea of "real" women, thus enabling me to become a whole person who could then pay some attention to the gay liberation movement. (My most vivid feeling after my first Lesbian experience: that my body was well-put-together, graceful, healthy, fine-feeling, and above all, *female*—a thought that made me laugh until I cried.) Whenever people talk about the difference between politics and personal life, I'm dumbfounded. Not only were these "political" movements intensely "personal" in their effect on me; I can't imagine a "political" stance that doesn't grow out of "personal" experience. On my own I would never have made it. I can still remember—and the institutional cruelty behind the incident still staggers me—telling my woman-disguised-as-man-with-man fantasy to my psychoanalyst, and this dreary piece of compromise (which did not, in fact, work erotically at all) met with his entire approval; he thought it was a real step forward that I should imagine myself to be a "real" woman being made love to by a "real" man. Then he said, smiling:

"But why do you have to be disguised as a man?"

There's a lot I haven't put in this story. For example, the years of limbo that followed my first Lesbian affair ("What do I do now?"), the overwhelming doubts that it had happened, which attacked me when I had to live an isolated life again in a world in which there exists absolutely no public sign that such things happen, or the self-hatred and persisting taboos ("Women are ugly" "Vaginas are slimy and strong and have horrible little teeth") or the terror of telling anyone.

As I said, by the time I read *The Well of Loneliness* I had learned that the whole business was absurd and impossible. (The books' gender roles also put me off.) I never dared buy one of those sleazy paperbacks I saw in drugstores, although I wanted them desperately. I was terrified to let the cashier see them. (Mind you, this didn't mean I was a Lesbian. It only meant that if I read all of the arousing scenes I glimpsed in them, I might become so aroused that I might go to a bar and do something Lesbian, which would be awful, because I wasn't one.) I suppose not reading about all those car crashes and suicides was a mild sort of plus, but I don't think it's a good idea to reach one's thirties without any cultural imagery for one of the most important parts of one's identity and one's life. So I've made some up. I hope that in filling the fantasy gap for myself, I've helped fill it for others, too.

I would like to thank various literary women for existing. Some of them know me and some do not. This is not an exhaustive list. Among them are: June Arnold, Sally Gearhart, Barbara Grier, Susan Griffin, Marilyn Hacker, Joan Larkin, Audre Lorde, Jill Johnston, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, and too many more to put down here.

Postscribbles

1. Overheard at a gay conference, Lesbian to gay man, near-by a woman minister in "minister suit" trying not to smile: "We're *all* in drag."
2. A common way to cloak one's hatred of and dismissal of an issue is to snot it, *i.e.*, the outraged ignorance of the reviews of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and the more sophisticated (and more hateful) reviews of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*.
3. The paralysis of the "open secret," everyone reassured about their generosity and your safety . . . *except you*. Or the (even worse) open secret which everybody knows *except you*, a closet so vanishingly small that it's collapsed into a one-dimensional point and extruded itself (possibly) into some other universe, where it may be of use but not in this one. A well-meaning woman friend, upon learning that I was a Lesbian, "That's all right. It's nobody's business but yours."
4. Some white male reviewer in the *New York Times* speaking slightly of the *irredentism*⁷ of minority groups in our time. The Boys never cease to amaze me.
5. That isn't an issue.
 - That isn't an issue *any more*.
 - That isn't *really* an issue any more.
 - Therefore why do you keep *bringing it up*?
 - You keep *bringing it up* because you are crazy.
 - You keep *bringing it up* because you are destructive.
 - You keep *bringing it up* because you want to be annoying.
 - You keep *bringing it up* because you are greedy and selfish.
 - You keep *bringing it up* because you are full of hate.

You keep *bringing it up* because you want to flaunt yourself.

You keep *bringing it up* because you deliberately want to separate yourself from the rest of the community.

How do you expect me to support a person as crazy/destructive/annoying/selfish/hateful/flaunting/separatist as you are?

I really cannot support someone as *bad* as that.

Especially since there is no really important issue involved.

6. Vaginas do *not* have sharp little teeth! Pass it on.

NOTES

1. And only if we had made love.
2. Up to about a year ago.
3. I don't mean that such men are "really" homosexual. That's going back to the model of the heterosexual institution again. They've suppressed a good deal of themselves, although what is allowed to exist isn't necessarily false.
4. I have only recently become aware of the extent of my own woman-hating and my own valuing of male bodies as more important, valuable, strong and hence "beautiful" than female bodies. Even a Lesbian wouldn't want an (ugh) *woman!* Even if she loved her. Feelings of inferiority climb into bed with you.
5. I'm talking of "masochism" as most women I know understand it: *i.e.* humiliation, shame, embarrassment, impersonality, *emotional misery*. Physical pain was not part of it; oddly enough, physical pain is what most men I know assume to be "masochism."

6. "Female Sexual Alienation" by Linda Phelps, reprinted in *The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from "The Ladder,"* eds. Grier and Reid, Diana Press, Baltimore, MD 1976, pp. 161-170. Ms. Phelps does not address herself exclusively to gay women. I think in this area she's probably right not to, as I suspect the mechanisms are the same for both, though one would suffer more symbolic distortion and the other more total obliteration.

7. Italian radicalism of the later 19th century, calling for a unification of all the Italian-speaking peoples, *i.e.*, nationalism: by extension, fighting for the rights of a group which perceives itself to have common interests. How wicked.

Joanna Russ

***Magic
Mommias,
Trembling
Sisters,
Puritans &
Perverts***

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