
PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF FEMINISM¹

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In 1905 a Russian named Sergei Nilus published the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. The book claimed to be a Russian translation of minutes, or protocols, from secret meetings of leaders of the international Jewish conspiracy. The *Protocols* is a strange, incoherent mish-mash. Its first-person narrator froths at the mouth as he boasts of Jewish responsibility for every evil of western civilization, from “liberal” political philosophies endorsing equality, to the break-up of Gentile families.

As if this workload weren't strenuous enough, Nilus claims that Jews also cornered the world's gold supply so as to wreak havoc in international financial markets. He adds that the elders of Zion cause anti-Semitism and pogroms, which they stir up to scare the rank-and-file and keep them in line. And he brags that Jews use prostitution to undermine Christian family morality. Most prostitutes are Jewish, Nilus says; those that aren't are brainwashed by the Jews into helping them destroy good Christian families.

Although serious scholars immediately exposed the *Protocols* for the fraud it was, demagogues used it successfully for decades to provoke mob violence against Jews. Translated into many languages, the book formed part of ambient German anti-Semitism in the Twenties and Thirties: Hitler and other Nazi leaders often referred to it for proof of the viciousness of the Jewish cabal in their midst. In pre-Soviet Russia the *Protocols* incited pogroms and lynchings.

It would be nice to think of this book as an outdated horror of times past, but its Arabic translation has lively sales today in the Middle East, its original Russian version has been re-issued by Pamyat, the right-wing nativist party in Russia, and I can buy it six blocks from my home in a store run by Louis Farrakhan's followers.

As I reflect on women's lives and women's voices at the end of the Twentieth Century, on the ways in which we strive to speak, and the ways in which our culture seeks to silence us, the *Protocols* often come to mind. Feminist writers are told we support censorship, we don't allow men to speak, we've muscled men's books out of the marketplace, and, most damning of all, we're shrill. For all I know we've cornered the world's gold supply and instigated pogroms. When I read the criticism levied against women, by women as well as men, I feel as though I were reading the “Protocols of the Elders of Feminism.”

Somehow women speaking, women finding a voice, women articulating the distress they feel when events public or private deprive them of a self, rouses angry retaliation by society. The last hundred and fifty years show repeated efforts by women to join together to find a voice — only to run headfirst against a wall of social pressures designed to silence them.

At the end of the last century, as more American women became educated and moved into the professions, newspapers and preachers trumpeted that feminism meant an end to family values. When the fight for suffrage grew more militant, political cartoons showed the dire outcome for America if suffrage arrived: men quivered helplessly at home, burdened by child care and housework, while women assumed the worst trappings of male behaviour—drunken debauchery in the state house. In the face of this incessant onslaught, from pulpit and press, many women were cowed into silence. Some even became anti-suffrage militants — the Phyllis Schlaflys of their era.

In 1913 the suffragist Elsie Clews Parsons — thinking votes for women imminent — said we would have to establish a women's museum so that future generations could be convinced there ever was a time when women were treated as inferior. Yet following suffrage — which took seven more years to achieve — women's gains in various arenas actually were overturned.

In the Kansas of my childhood, women who worked outside the home were viewed with pity or suspicion, or even contempt. ("She can't be a good mother," many of the townswomen said of the woman pediatrician, choosing — as my own mother did — the male doctor for their children.)

While it's true today that we have once more broken out of that mold, that women work outside the home in record numbers, we have not yet escaped the opprobrium of being unnatural, unfit mothers, or causing lasting social harm by our work. Indeed, speaker after speaker at the 1992 Republican National Convention — including Marilyn Quayle, a lawyer, with a large personal —taxpayer-supported— staff to do her job as the vice president's wife — condemned working women, professional women, women outside the home for causing many of our social ills.

Quayle added that feminists were angry "because most women do not wish to be liberated from their essential nature as women."

Apologists for women in the workplace stress that we're there out of eco-

conomic necessity, not because we want to be. Only an unnatural woman would get up and tell you she works for the pleasure she finds in her job, or for her mental health.

During the 1982-83 recession, Ronald Reagan spoke on causes of the economic downturn. "Part of the unemployment is not as much recession," he said, "... [but] — ladies, I'm not picking on anyone — because of the increase in women who are working today." Patrick Buchanan echoed this sentiment at the 1992 Republican National Convention. Working women, he said, are taking jobs from men. Like Jews, women are causing economic upheaval.

We have a similar horrible effect on social relations. Just as the *Protocols* accused Jews of stirring up pogroms for their own nefarious purposes, some people today accuse women of causing rape. Of course there's always been a strong contingent that claims women cause rape because men can't control themselves in the face of our seductive wiles.

Writers today give women an even bigger responsibility in the problem. People like San Francisco political scientist Neil Gilbert or the young journalist Katie Roiphe don't say we invite rape, but that we *create* it. They say that — in many instances — the very notion of rape is a feminist misconstruction of normal sexual relations.

For conservative publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, writers like Roiphe or Gilbert are a heaven-sent answer to the upheaval generated by the International Feminist Conspiracy. Early in 1991, the *Journal* published an essay of Gilbert's in which he said that feminists cry rape to stir up other women. An anonymous *Journal* op-ed piece claimed that rape crisis centers were consciously decorated in a tawdry way to keep rape victims in a constant state of man-hating depression.

Along the same lines, in September 1992 the *Journal* lambasted the women in the Tailhook incident. "They want to go into combat but they can't take a little lewdness at home," the *Journal* complained. Or whined. Or said shrilly. Damned humorless feminists can't see the joke in drunken men fondling their breasts in hotel corridors.

From Ronald Reagan blaming working women for causing unemployment, to *Barrons*, *Newsweek*, and other publications singling out women as the most avaricious and destructive examples of the Eighties wave of greed, from the head of the U.S. Marine Corps denouncing working mothers for softening the spirit of American fighting men to Allan Bloom blaming women scholars for ruining American education, we have been under assault on many fronts.

Many women are now reluctant to call themselves feminists; others have been silenced under the fear of being labelled "shrill," or "strident." Popular culture has linked "feminist" with "lesbian" — and most pejoratively. Female students who entered Northwestern University Medical School in 1992 told

a woman professor that they didn't want to be called women: it sounded too feminist, too harsh. They asked the professor to call them "girls."

My own experience as a crime writer closely follows this national history. I have taken part in an exciting epoch in women's story-telling. When I started reading mysteries thirty-five years ago, most women characters could be divided between virgins — the sexually chaste but helpless heroines — and whores — who could act, but were only capable of evil deeds.

Today we have a legion of women playing a range of active roles, from my own V. I. Warshawski and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, to such exciting newcomers as Marele Day's Claudia Valentine. Ten years ago I knew all of the women writing books with strong women heroes. Today there are so many I can't keep track of them.

The reaction to women's increased power to speak varies greatly. On the positive side, we have received a substantial embrace of welcome, from readers of both sexes as well as from publishers. Our growing numbers in the crime fiction field tell the story: fifteen years ago women published about a quarter of the crime novels. Today we make up almost forty percent of active U.S. crime writers.

On the negative side, reaction ranges from a dislike of our stories to a highly vocal fear that speech by women is making speech by men impossible. In fact, the fear is that women — especially feminist women — will remove men from the marketplace altogether. In the equivalent of cornering the world's gold supply, we will corner the world's word supply.

Finally, as women's speech has gained in confidence, and in a market presence, the violence against women in crime fiction has also escalated. Any attempt to discuss, especially to criticize this violence, generates highly emotional protest.

Although I have often lectured on women's speech, on silence, and on the way in which crime fiction treats women, I began thinking about this specific subject after reading a 1992 *Chicago Tribune* story highly critical of Sisters in Crime. This organization, which I helped found in 1986, is an advocate for women in the crime fiction field. Sisters played a significant role in developing women both as writers and readers of crime fiction.

The *Tribune* story was written by Bill Brashler, who is both a crime writer and a *Tribune* reporter. Brashler was convinced that Sisters in Crime was driving men's books out of the marketplace, that we had intimidated bookstores so badly that Brashler, among other men, couldn't find shelf space for his own work.

The story singled me out for especial excoriation. To underscore the point of how dangerous I was, Brashler described me as looking ominous, dressed completely in black, with a "pointed nose" and "eyes that cut and slash."

This language was so evocative of anti-Semitic stereotyping that at first I was confused, feeling myself attacked as a Jew. It took a while for me to

realize I was being attacked as a woman. Over time it dawned on me that my speech, both in print and in public, was a convenient way for Brashler to deal with the helplessness he felt when his own books didn't sell as well as he wanted. To overcome his helplessness, and his rage at his helplessness, he attacked me, not through my work, but through my body.

That should not have surprised me: the female body almost always stands for the unruly, uncontrolled cause of terror in the minds of the fearful. In fact, it is through the body that all marginalized people are attacked. The pornography of the Third Reich, for instance, focused on greasy, long-nosed Jews with unnatural sexual appetites. In the same way, fears and fantasies in white America created black men of amazing sexual powers, black women with animal natures who could — miraculously — be both whore and mammy.

For many people, of any race and either sex, the female body symbolizes something fearful and incomprehensible. Female sexuality is so powerful that it must be subdued at any cost. Paradoxically, we also believe that to be feminine means to be weak. Perhaps we think of masculine as meaning strong because it has subdued the terrifying female.

When you think you are weak you are overwhelmed by a terrifying sense of helplessness. For those who feel truly powerless, rage is one way of achieving a temporary sense of self-worth. The ability to punish someone weaker, to humiliate them and make them feel helpless in turn, gives a fragile person a fleeting sense of mastery. The female body becomes a convenient target of rage, both in fact and in fiction.

We can see this in recent attacks against women. One of the defendants in New York's Central Park jogger case, where a woman was gang-raped, beaten, and left for dead, said he wanted to attack her because "he felt like a midget, a mouse, something less than a man". Marc Lepine said he killed fourteen women in a Montreal classroom because he was unemployed and they were "all a bunch of fucking feminists." Both men felt small; hurting women gave them a sense of size, or power.

Pornography is the tangible expression of these feelings. Sadistic pornography ritually acts out a fear of vulnerability. It shows men overcoming their weakness by being in control while the female side of themselves is destroyed.

Tales of humiliation are in essence tales about helplessness. Rape in real life occurs not because of overwhelming sexual attraction, but because the rapist feels helpless. The only way he can rid himself of that weak state — at least for a brief time — is to humiliate someone else, to make her as small and vulnerable as he is in his own eyes. Pornography, as Susan Griffin has persuasively argued in *Pornography and Silence*, is in fact a ritual acting out of dominance. Sadistic pornography in particular shows a mastery of weakness, by rendering our feminine side helpless and under total control. Such writing demonstrates not power, but the writer's fear of his² own weakness.

Yet such words will empower him if they frighten his own feminine aspect into silence. He will feel even stronger if he can frighten women into silence.

What happens if the feminine starts speaking up? Then he needs to marshal more substantial resources to silence it. This is one way to look at the backlash against women in the last three decades. The more public space, the more public speech we take on, the more terrifying we become to those — men and women alike — who feel little mastery of their own lives. This terror can be seen in many arenas, from the murderous rage against American abortion providers to the relentless verbal attacks on Hillary Clinton by the American right.

I want to look specifically at the way this fear is represented in the world of crime fiction. I am not going to discuss legal issues surrounding pornography and censorship, but two literary points: tales of violence as ways of trying to silence female speech, and the hysteria that develops when women try to discuss tales of violence.

Central to the problem is what it means to tell stories. The word fiction itself comes from the Latin “*ingere*”, meaning to mould, or form, by way of the Middle English “*feinen*.” “Fiction” means to “fashion” or “form.” It gives — something — a shape. That is what stories do: they place a template over life experience and give it a shape.

Women as constructors of fiction — women as shapers of experience — are relatively new. In the Seventeenth Century the person Americans venerate as our earliest champion of civil liberties, John Winthrop, condemned his neighbor, the poet Anne Hopkins. She lost her reason, he said, “by occasion of giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books.” He added that “if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women ... she had kept her wits.”

It has taken the hard work of many women standing up to excoriation — or in the case of writers like Kate Chopin dying in the face of it — to come to our present situation, where women have easy access to books, both as readers and as writers.

But as women’s speech has increased — as women have begun taking up more space — we have struck at the heart of a complicated sense of power. Because male speech historically defined the female, we are grasping something fundamental when we say we will define ourselves.

For some men, this has clearly been an exciting, even a liberating concept — a whole new way to think about gender, and about how we relate to each other as men and women. For others, this effort at women’s speech has been extremely threatening. We know that because in the last ten or fifteen years we have been bombarded with books, and movies, which show women being violated in horrific ways. These run the gamut from snuff films, and to crime fiction which describes in careful detail the making of snuff films to books like Heywood Gould’s *Double Bang*, which opens with two women being

sodomized and beaten, or *American Psycho*, where a woman dies when a starving rat is released in her vagina.

The mystery has always had a pornographic element, but it is only in the last two decades that books which violate women in such graphic detail have been part of mainstream publishing — reviewed and glorified. Furthermore, the level of mainstream fictional violence continues to escalate.

This violence is intended to scare women into silence. Rex Stout, another champion of civil liberties, made the point quite clearly in his last Nero Wolfe book, *A Family Affair*, published in 1975. One of the characters is a feminist. She is strident and hostile as such women are usually portrayed in fiction. Archie Goodwin, Wolfe's sidekick, advises fellow detective Saul Panzer to rape her in order to get her to co-operate in an interrogation. Archie is saying that as a feminist, she is speaking out of turn — in this case, she is keeping silent out of turn: she is refusing to speak when Archie and Saul command her to. She is out of control and must be punished. No one is further out of control than an admitted feminist. Rape is the necessary means to subdue her.

As women have continued to speak, crime writers no longer tell us that we *ought* to be raped. Rather, they demonstrate the rape, and show the ensuing humiliation which forces women out of public life. In Heywood Gould's *Double Bang*, for instance, the alleged heroine is a psychoanalyst in New York City. In the words of Michael Korda, the president of Simon and Shuster who sent me bound galleys of the book in hopes I would give it a jacket blurb,

At the novel's center is Karen Winterman — a beautiful psychoanalyst who falls for a seductive psychopath who just happens to be a drug addict and her new patient. Breaking the cardinal rule of her profession, she finds herself, in the wake of her lover's murder, trapped in a series of ever more compromising positions: homicide suspect, hitman's target, key witness, chief mourner, unwitting victim.... [The book also] brings new meaning to the phrase "police brutality."

At the book's end the psychoanalyst has been so damaged — both physically and emotionally — by her beguiling patient that she gives up her professional practice and returns to her parents' Pennsylvania farm. She has learned her lesson. She has shut up and retreated from being a woman — working on her own in the big city — to being a girl — a child back under the protection of her parents.

Tales like these imply that if women persist in taking up public space, they can be tormented into retreat. Those who create alternate stories, where public women maintain their voices and are not frightened back to the family farm often find a curious reaction.

I had my own experience of this phenomenon. In 1992 a helpful reader

sent me some clips about my work from a couple of fanzines. In these clips two or three readers complained that they didn't understand why anyone would buy or read my work: they find me shrill, they find me whiney, and my prose is pretty poor. Of course these comments hurt my feelings — I know I'm not Jane Austen, but I don't like to be told about it so pointedly.

However, I did *not* read into these comments the corollary that their writers thought my works should be withdrawn from the market. They expressed a critical opinion, and asked readers to join them in not buying my books.

In April, 1991, in an invited op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, I raised a similar question about books and movies which revolve around graphic and degrading violence against women. Why should women buy such work? I suggested some reasons why we do, and ended by saying we shouldn't pay to see ourselves demeaned. Nowhere did I say publishers or movie moguls should suppress or remove these materials from theaters or bookstores.

People wrote me after that column appeared. Most felt a good old-fashioned "click" of recognition in my words and it warmed me to hear from them. Some, though, told me they were "First Amendment absolutists" and they were outraged that I advocated censorship. One man left a packet of materials for me at a bookstore where I was signing telling me that I was slandering child molesters. Another anonymous letter suggested rape might help me out.

It is this juxtaposition that lies at the heart of the furor over the discussion about pornography. I ask why women support an industry based on our degradation, and someone says I need to be degraded. In other words, I need to be terrified into shutting up. Going back to the criticism of my writing, the readers who objected to it did so because it was "shrill" and "whiney." We all know that "shrill" along with "strident" have become code words for denigrating women who are perceived as speaking out of turn. Every time I read a review which calls me "shrill," "strident," or says I have "a chip on my shoulder," I flinch. I have exactly the reaction that my critics hope for: I wonder if I am too negative, if I should tone down both V. I. Warshawski and my own public remarks. The criticism is having its desired effect: I feel the pressure to be like the new medical students, to stop speaking like a woman and turn back into a girl.

It is impossible to be objective about my own words. But I see the words of other women treated in similar ways. In a March, 1988 mystery round-up, the *Chicago Tribune* discussed a book of Marcia Muller's together with six books by men. One of these six treated a serial killer who raped women and, after killing them, left "a gruesome knife mark on their chests." The characters are described as "believable" and the book "an enjoyable entertainment." In another, where the hero's daughter is living on the streets, with all that implies for women, and where the villain's racist slayings are described in graphic detail, the *Tribune* tells us the writing is "compelling and expert..."

and shows a welcome sense of humor.”

On the other hand, while the *Tribune* has tepid praise for Marcia Muller’s work — “the plot bogs down... but Muller is skillful,” — they wish she would drop Sharon McCone’s feminism, complaining that Muller is “occasionally ... heavy-handed with the feminist shadings,” and adding, “Haven’t we all outgrown that banter?”

It’s a curious representation of reality. Books where men rape and brutalize women are compelling, expert, and humorous. But we’ve all outgrown feminist banter. Isn’t it, surely, the opposite? Stores are filled to the gills with books about rapists and serial killers. Movies certainly are — *Newsweek* estimates that one in eight movies shows acts of sexual violence against women — but this feminist banter makes us mighty uncomfortable — so shut up already.

And this is the final strand in the complex tangle of women’s speech. When we try to discuss the depiction of women in crime fiction or films, when we object to tales of degradation, people become agitated quite fast. In the literary world they don’t threaten to rape us into subjection. Instead they raise the mighty arm of the First Amendment and tell us we are setting ourselves up as censors.³

My experience in *Sisters in Crime* illuminates this issue. Since our inception seven years ago, we have tried, as an organization, to find a way to analyze and discuss the depiction of women in crime fiction. Just the fact that we talk about the matter has raised a firestorm. One crime writer, a woman, outraged by our organization, said in a letter to a mystery fanzine that even if every fictive act of rape led to a real rape, we must still publish works about rape.

This is a most extraordinary statement. What it says is that terrorizing women is more important than women’s speech.

As *Sisters in Crime* struggled with how to analyze the depiction of women in crime fiction, crime writers from all over America began denouncing us in the pages of mystery magazines for violating the First Amendment. When we finally had a national meeting of *Sisters in Crime*, in May of 1988 our members were so nervous about the possibility of being labelled as censors that they asked that the project be removed from the organization.

What we have here is a baffling conundrum. Sadism against women is protected speech, but women who protest such sadism are violating the First Amendment. Think about it.

People who are opposed to looking at or discussing the degradation of women tell us they are First Amendment absolutists. This is supposed to encourage discussion. If you are a First Amendment absolutist you don’t have to ask or answer any questions about speech and silence.

Absolutists rally around pornography because they believe, as U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Douglas did, that pornography lies at th

heart of the First Amendment.

What does this mean? In the first place, it means that absolutists believe, or claim to believe, that expanding one kind of speech expands all speech. We learn to say this by rote in grammar school, along with “I disapprove of what you say but will defend to the death your right to say it.”

But is this true? Going back to the Elders of Zion, do we really believe that the expansion of anti-Semitic writings in Europe created a climate in which Jews were able to speak more freely?

In the States, Canada, and western Europe, a group has sprung up claiming that the Holocaust is a hoax. If we expanded this body of writing, ran the ads its supporters try to buy space for, and persuaded the publishing industry of the high sales potential for books proving the Holocaust was just another invention of the Elders of Zion, would we be increasing speech for Jews? Would we not be making them live in greater fear? And having to put more and more energy into refuting these lies, demonstrating by every public act that they were reliable responsible citizens?

For centuries public opinion in the United States supported books and essays that proved the social, cultural and genetic inferiority of blacks. These kinds of books were accompanied by coarse stereotyping of African-American behavior, in mysteries as well as other fiction. Rex Stout, an ardent Civil Rights supporter in late life, showed black men as inarticulate cowards and drunks in his early work. Did the expansion, protection, and acceptance of these works really create a climate in which Black Americans felt free to speak? Did it really create a climate in which they could feel fully human?

Besides a belief that protecting one kind of speech protects all kinds of speech, self-styled absolutists believe that all speakers have equal access to speech. Implicit in this attitude is the notion that ideas are a commodity, like computer software, and that the market sorts out good ideas from bad. The marketplace of ideas is held to be a benign place, free from coercion or violence — a level playing field.

Only a handful of free-market extremists would hold such a belief about the marketplace in tangible goods. Since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, American commerce has been regulated by laws passed in response to violence, bribery, treachery and low cunning in the business world. It shouldn't surprise us to find similar acts in the marketplace of ideas.

A look at publishing — the industry where ideas and tangible goods intersect — shows the delicate relationship between censorship and speech. The average U.S. publisher gets about ten thousand manuscripts a year, and publishes between fifty and three hundred titles. Is the decision not to publish the remaining 9700 based solely on economics? The answer is — yes ... and no.

The decision to publish is based on the publisher's sense of the market. But fear is one factor that can also play a role. After the fatwa was pro-

nounced against Salmon Rushdie, some publishers shied away from printing anything controversial about Islam, Iran, or even the Rushdie affair itself. My English publisher at the time actually cancelled the publication of a novel set during a war between two mythical Middle Eastern countries.

When I was published by William Morrow my editor there told me his management rejected an oral history of abortion before Roe because they were afraid of retaliation by anti-abortion groups — they were afraid of a boycott against their other publications. That story, if true, was certainly an example of censorship. Or was it economics? See, they thought they'd lose sales, so they chose not to publish, so it wasn't really censorship. Or was it?

If publishers think the graphic dismemberment of women has sales potential — as Simon and Shuster, for instance, did with Heywood Gould's *Double Bang* — they will market books with that theme.

It was in 1991 that Simon and Shuster decided another book they'd bought was too hot to handle and cancelled its contract. That, of course, was Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.

Women in the publishing company were dismayed by the manuscript, but didn't receive a public hearing until magazines like *Spy* and *Newsweek* learned about the book and gave it a play: That roused a national controversy which ended with Simon and Shuster refunding Ellis's advance and cancelling publication.

Simon and Shuster's decision to pull the book roused a vast outcry. They had censored Ellis, according to writers groups everywhere, and they were vilified for doing so. But Simon & Shuster were not considered the main culprit: it was feminists who had gagged Brett Easton Ellis. The international conspiracy working round the clock.

Indeed, Norman Mailer gave *American Psycho* some encouraging words in the March, 1991 *Vanity Fair* — in a piece whose deck proclaimed a “slugfest” between “feminists and First Amendment acolytes.” Mailer's endorsement was not surprising. After all, Mailer is the man who stabbed his wife to test his creativity to the maximum. He is also the man who said, while president of PEN USA, that women would never write as well as men because they lacked balls. So women crucified with nail guns, or killed with starving rats, must have sounded pretty creative to him.

So many writers organizations rallied behind *American Psycho* that Random House picked it up in the name of protecting the First Amendment. Of course all the advance publicity may have made them think the book would be a commercial success — but that is probably a gross slander against a protector of free speech.

American Psycho was not the first, nor indeed the only book, to be treated in this way. A year earlier, Harper-Collins cancelled Daniel Pipes's contract for a book on the Rushdie affair. (Mr. Pipes was then director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia.) Like Ellis, Pipes was

under contract. Like Ellis, he wrote the book and delivered it to New York. As with Ellis, Pipes's editor accepted the manuscript and put the book into production. At pre-publication meetings to discuss publicity, word of the book drifted upward to senior staff in the Murdoch empire. Fearing the Ayatollah's wrath, they decided to pull the book.

For some reason, no one in America thought this was censorship. I never got red alerts from the Author's Guild, MWA, PEN, or any other writer's organization urging me to protect the First Amendment by keeping Daniel Pipes in print. *Vanity Fair* didn't trumpet "Mullahs against the First Amendment," or indeed write about Pipes at all.

On top of that, in the wake of Rushdie's fatwa, a number of people usually foursquare for free speech actually waffled around. Faculty at Wayne State University in Detroit refused to sign a petition supporting the bookstore's decision to carry *The Satanic Verses* for fear of rousing violence among their Islamic students. PEN-America, under the leadership of Norman Mailer, had to be pushed into making a stand on the issue. Many people, including officials of both the U.S. and the British governments, as well as the Cardinal Archbishop of New York, did not defend Rushdie's speech. Indeed, these people said Rushdie had been asking for trouble (makes you think of a rape victim, doesn't it — he dressed his words provocatively. He was asking for it.)

The really interesting question becomes: why is it pornography that rouses people to First Amendment furor? Why doesn't politics rouse us, especially the politics of a book on *The Satanic Verses*, where we see in horrifying detail what happens when a government wants to censor a writer?

Protected speech becomes a razor with a most sharp and difficult edge to balance on. We can't conceive any other attitude than that pornographic speech should be protected. But what we don't hear from First Amendment absolutists is a cry to encourage and protect the speech of those silenced by degrading books and movies. Indeed, absolutists try to silence those who even question the role pornography plays in current fiction.

When a writer like the Bangladeshi Taslima Nasrin is censored for questioning the role of women in Islam, we cry out — although not very loudly (PEN, the Author's Guild, and so on never sent the appeals for help for Ms. Nasrin's cause that they did for Salmon Rushdie.) But in America, sadistic pornography rouses an emotional and legal outcry because it, too, reflects a series of social attitudes toward women. Women's bodies are the source of evil in western religion. Therefore these bodies must be punished, and women who speak must be tortured into silence. When we challenge these notions we are — just like Ms. Nasrin — undercutting two thousand years of an orthodoxy so blindly accepted that it permeates our fairy tales, our crime novels, the so-called mainstream works of writers like Saul Bellow or Josef Skvorecky, as well as sadistic pornography.

Pornography simply reflects the rage our culture feels against women. It is because the rape and degradation of women ultimately express a fearsome social attitude that I don't advocate censorship of books, movies, music, or art that rely on such scenes.

It isn't just a desire to know what the enemy is thinking. In some ways, we all carry a piece of that enemy within us. You can't grow up in a world which despises women without internalizing a certain degree of self-hatred. Just as blacks in America learned to call themselves "niggers" and to internalize the society's denigration of blackness, just as Jews too often find within ourselves anti-Semitic feelings, so women learn to doubt their voices.

No, we shouldn't censor pornography because there's no point to it. We can break a mirror if we don't like the image we see in it, but that doesn't change what the mirror reflected. And that's what pornography is: the mirror of the society's attitudes toward women.

But that's why we should discuss it, freely and fully. The better we understand what we're reading, and writing, the more possibility we have of changing — what we want and what we will accept from society. The more we discuss it the more we may come to see it for what it is: a narcotic, like alcohol, or heroin, to numb those who feel helpless and to give them a passing sense of power.

This began to happen for a group of thirty people in Chicago, who did the preliminary work on Sisters in Crime's study of the depiction of women in the mystery. When this group read the thousand crime novels published in 1987, we had the experience of seeing the degradation of women in a new way. Everyone was an avid mystery reader. Most, the men as well as the women, identified themselves as feminists. Over and over they said: "Until I began the project I didn't realize what I was reading. I didn't see how women were degraded. I'm so used to reading it I didn't notice it."

Ninety years after publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* anti-Semitism is alive and well. I know it won't die in my lifetime. Nor will the fear of women disappear, the fear that makes us condemn the feminine as weak, and then seeks to destroy it in a revulsion of rage.

Twenty-six hundred years ago Sappho wrote,

*Although they are
Only breath, words
Which I command
Are immortal.*

I long for the day when the words of the silent shall rise and become immortal.

NOTES:

¹ I am indebted to Cass Sunstein, the Karl N. Llewellyn Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Chicago Law School, for reading this essay and advising me on the First Amendment to the United States Constitution as it relates to pornography. Professor Marianne Wesson, of the University of Colorado School of Law, also made insightful comments. Dr. Ernest Wolf, of the Institute for Psychoanalysis in Chicago, helped me understand the concept of rage as an expression of helplessness, which lies at the heart of this essay.

² The masculine pronoun is used in this passage to indicate my hunch that men produce most pornography. Women may share these feelings. They also write — and respond — to sadistic pornography.

³ The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievance.”