

# WHORES AND MOTHERS: SOME IDEAS ON WOMEN AND PORNOGRAPHY

MARY HAYWARD

Sex is more important for women than it is for men. The reason is simple. For centuries, sex for most women meant intercourse, the woman who had intercourse risked pregnancy, and the woman who got pregnant risked her life. Only in this century has contraception become easy and childbirth safe. The generation who reached adulthood around 1960 were the first generation of women for whom it was true that sex was not dangerous for them and had not been dangerous for their mothers and grandmothers either. The old wives tales, the stories every woman pregnant for the first time hears from her family and neighbours, no longer included escapes from death. This was every bit as important as the Pill.

However, the legacy of our great-grandmothers is still with us. Both the pro-censorship lobbies draw on it. (If I name them from the front people who presented their Bills to Parliament in 1985/6 and call them Churchill and Short it will save time, at the risk of being a bit unfair to the individuals concerned.) The Churchill lobby draws on the surviving feeling that sex is simply dangerous, especially to teenagers. The position of the Short lobby is more complex, but I believe that it too rests on the long experience of the days when sex for women was deeply serious while for men it was not. Mrs Whitehouse is the mother who won't let her child play with matches. The feminists are the girl whose brother is allowed to play with matches while she isn't. Their anger stems from

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Mary Hayward is Secretary of the Campaign Against Censorship and is a regular contributor to its journal *Uncensored*.

## BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF LIBERTARIAN FEMINISTS

Chairwoman: Judy Tame



25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Mickelthwait  
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a deep resentment that 1) men can treat sex frivolously and get away with it and 2) what men are treating frivolously is sex and therefore, for women, an unfit subject for frivolity. It does not seem to occur to them that without the liberalisation of the sixties they would be as ignorant as their great-grandmothers of what the men were playing at. They exasperate their elders because, never having lived in the pre-permissive era, they have no idea of their good fortune. They blame page 3 of the *Sun* for rape in cheerful ignorance of an age when the *word* rape never appeared in newspapers.

### A VISUAL FANTASY

The page 3 thesis rests on three assumptions, all of them false. The first is that men can, by social conditioning or even by effort of will, be prevented from being sexually aroused by the mere sight of a woman's body. This is not possible. For a human being, sight is the most important sense. For the majority of men the sight of a woman's body is stimulating and that stimulus is pleasurable. That is the kind of creature they are. Dogs that developed a culture would have a pornography of smell.

The second assumption, and most important for a discussion of censorship, is that the woman in erotic art is a real woman. She isn't. Significantly, she never gets pregnant. She is a fantasy invented by men to bridge the gap between their sex lives as they are and as they would prefer them to be. Remember that women took sex seriously because they had to. In Western Europe, by a process too complex to go into here, the demand for seriousness translated into a demand for emotional involvement as well as, or sometimes instead of, legal security. But most men some of the time and some men all of the time would prefer sex without involvement. (It does not matter that the preference is culturally determined, not innate. Security was for women a necessity, for men an option. If emotional involvement is associated with security and so defined as feminine, men will be encouraged to reject it, sometimes at a high cost to themselves.) The genuine uninvolved woman was rare. The fake uninvolved woman, who will provide sex without involvement for money, is as old as civilisation; the prostitute. The rest of the gap was and is filled by imaginary women - pornography. You may know that the same year, 1959, which saw the passing of the Obscene Publications Act from which so much trouble is supposed to stem, also saw the passing of the Street Offences Act which took prostitution, at least temporarily, off the streets. It made uninvolved sex a little harder to find. The demand wouldn't just go away. Did the porn-brokers move in where the pimps had been?

### FEMALE LITERACY AND THE CULT OF SENSIBILITY

It is the nature of the porno woman that she is imaginary. It was because most women were not like that that she was invented. To suggest, as both the Churchill lobby and the Short lobby do, that otherwise normal people extrapolate from her to the real live women around them is rubbish. I think that the idea arose partly because awareness of erotic literature came late to women. For centuries erotic writing was by men for men because, by and large, only men could read. The spread of female literacy happened to coincide with the rise of the cult of sensibility, culminating in the prudery we associate with the Victorians. Educated women remained in ignorance of a whole area of the male imagination. This ignorance was chipped away slowly but did not finally crumble until the 1960's. It was supposed that women would welcome this new interest. But often they didn't, because they did not understand that they were being invited to share a fantasy, to take part in a game. They were in the

position of a mother who has never in her life played cops and robbers, finds her son playing with a toy gun, and assumes that if he had a real weapon he would really shoot people. Pornography is very stylised. Women coming to it for the first time found its rules so strange that they did not realise that they were rules.

### DEPRAVITY AND 'DESENSITISATION'

Another reason for the mistake has to do with the rise of photography. The porno woman in writing or graphic art, though she may be based on a live model, is at some distance from actual flesh. An image on film, either still or moving, remains much closer to a real body. It is that much easier to confuse an unreal situation with a real one. The distinction between actress or model and prostitute was apt to get blurred even before the arrival of photography, but the slogan 'Porn degrades women' is ambiguous. On the one hand it is a gesture of solidarity. The women's movement were entirely right to try to abolish the Victorian concept of whores as a sub-species. But in doing so they laid themselves wide open to take-over by people who still held the very Victorian people that *every* woman who undresses in front of someone else is a whore, that every picture of a naked woman is pornography. And the idea of the less than human - the degraded - slipped back in.

I said that women encountering pornography for the first time were in the position of a mother who fails to distinguish between what her child pretends to do and what he may really do. The more intelligent anti-porn campaigners realise that the man who watches a rape on his video and then goes out and rapes someone for real, if he exists at all, is a case of arrested development or mental illness. His hold on reality is imperfect. But since they must have a political reason for what they want they have developed the notion of 'desensitisation' which is the third false assumption on which their case rests. In fact desensitisation is our old friend depravity and corruption under another name and there is nothing modern about it and not much Christian either. I mentioned the 18th century cult of sensibility. Sensibility is, among other things, the capacity to be easily shocked. It began as a fashion in behaviour among the educated and well-to-do and from there moved down the social scale. The 19th century social climber, and his wife, were pleased to fake a delicacy they did not necessarily feel. What had begun as a fashion then became a political tool. On the one hand Victorian husbands and fathers could threaten their women with loss of 'refinement' as an excuse to keep them ignorant. On the other social reformers could claim, with some justification, that the poor would be 'refined' too if they had not been brutalised by the very real squalor of the conditions in which they lived. Today it is assumed that everybody is so sensitive that real squalor and real violence are enough to 'desensitise' us. We have the grotesque spectacle of families who live in one room and sleep in one bed being spoken of as though the worst thing which could happen to their children was to see a man pretend to smack a woman's face on television.

### PROTECTING THE CHILD THEY ONCE WERE

I sometimes think that anti-porn campaigners have not only blotted out their own childhoods but have had no contact with real children since. They are still living with the nineteenth century ideal child whose 'innocence' must be preserved at all costs. In real children, reactions to, for example, fairy-stories or television monsters vary widely among children of the same age and between members of the same family. What is more, people who are upset by frightening or violent fiction go on being upset, and people who aren't, aren't. The little girl who calmly watches every epi-

sode of a series which shocks her grandmother isn't desensitised. For one thing, her understanding of the conventions of film narrative may be much more sophisticated than her elders'. For the other, much as the adult may dislike the idea, she was tougher in the first place. I believe that the anti-porn campaigners whose constant cry is 'we must protect children' are not trying to protect any existing child at all; neither their own nor that of some hypothetical less responsible parent. The child they are shielding is the child that they themselves once were; an unlucky child who was never told that it is normal for six-year-olds to have bad dreams.

### SEX AND VIOLENCE ALWAYS ASSOCIATED

It would not surprise me if the next century looks back on our obsession with violence in the same spirit as we look back on the Victorian obsession with sex. Just as they saw sex everywhere and rushed to cover it up, so today's would-be censors see violence everywhere. However, it is usually a particular kind of violence. Winston Churchill's 'laundry list' typifies the thinking I have in mind - a thinking which cannot discuss violence without dragging in sex or sex without dragging in violence. The two are always associated. This association is common ground for both right and left, Churchill and Short. The difference is that while the feminist censors focus on the special case of violence by men towards women - almost to the point where they deny women any aggressive feelings as the Victorians denied them sexual ones - for the likes of Mrs Whitehouse all acts of violence, regardless of context, content, intensity and whether they are fact or fiction, have equal importance.

Whitehouse herself is a prime example of the adult whose mind still harbours a frightened child, believing that unless she maintains constant vigilance, nasty things will crawl out of the television and 'get' little children. There will probably always be people like her. But the other fear from which the right-wing drew their power has gone. The days when pregnancy could be used as a threat to keep girls in line are over. The woman who does not want marriage or children can demand respect for her life-style. The old division of women into whores and mothers is broken. Sexual intercourse no longer carries the risk it did and the number of women who can enjoy sex is going to increase, especially if the culture shock of discovering the games men play with it can be overcome.

In fact the number of women who take page 3 in their stride is huge. Clare Short boasted of 3,000 letters about her Bill, but the *Sun* sells 4 million copies. She will never hear from the ordinary women who think that, well, men are like that and anyway it's only a picture; women who use the vocabulary of Victorian values (as the *Sun* itself does) because that is the only way they know of discussing sex but are a lot more pragmatic in practice - people like my neighbours.

### WOMEN AS VICTIMS

Not only do the feminist lobby continue to mistake imaginary women for real ones and assume that men do the same, but they have adopted as their own both the Victorian conservatives' idea of women as mentally fragile creatures who must not encounter an offensive picture and the Victorian radicals' idea of women as permanent victims. They have developed a definition of womanhood every bit as oppressive as the one their predecessors fought to destroy. I think we can best oppose them by pointing this out, and by pointing out that since sex is still less important to men than it is to women, men in positions of power and influence might be quite happy to let them talk on and on about pornography instead of concentrating on equality, justice, or freedom.