PORNOGRAPHIC MANHOOD
AND THE SCARLET LETTER

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In “The Invention of Pornography” Lynn Hunt describes the genre as a social creation that is defined collaboratively by those who produce it and those who try to stamp it out. Lists of forbidden titles in pre-revolutionary France form a canon, in which erotic books—like Therese Philosophe—are mingled together with a general run of works deemed treasonable and seditious: attacks on the ancien regime routinely accused clerics and great lords of sexual depravity, and some titles offered graphic descriptions of their lewd behavior. A new form of illicit sexual writing emerged in the nineteenth century, however, in keeping with the emerging middle-class pre-occupation with the sacredness of the home: censors now denounced pornography not for sedition, but for indecency. Producers of pornography, likewise actuated by impulses that arose from the new cultural arrangement, generated distinctive smut. Rather than jeering at the vices of decadent aristocrats, the reader of the new porn found himself inveigled into the mingled desire and guilt of sexual aggressors alarmingly like himself.

The term “pornography” entered the English language in 1850, and was quickly applied to the new mode of sexual writing. Twentieth-century definitions, like contemporary instances, often retain qualities first observed in the antebellum period. The standard adopted by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1966 specifies material that “appeals to a prurient interest,” implying an itch that gets worse as it is scratched. Reading porn heightens the impulse to read porn, so the definition indicates; and this experience carries forward the quality of guilty and obsessive reader involvement that became characteristic of the genre in the early nineteenth century.

The emerging genre of pornography, I argue here, discloses and serves the sexual consternations of an emerging genre of manhood; I then turn to Hawthorne’s depiction of pornographic manhood in The Scarlet Letter.

George Lippard’s Quaker City provides a classic instance of the new porn. Lorrimer and Mary sit on a sofa in the Rose Chamber of Monk Hall, a gothic castle of lust in downtown Philadelphia. The two figures appear to be perfect opposites: Lorrimer is an experienced sexual predator, Mary an innocent maiden. “It was the purpose of this libertine,” Lippard remarks, “to dishonor the stainless girl, before he left her presence. Before day break she would be a polluted thing.”

Mary in this scenario is evidently a woman, soon to be raped by a man, namely Lorrimer. Yet “Mary,” I propose, is a man in disguise.
Feminist discussions of pornography—from Susan Brownmiller to Catherine McKinnon—have shown that sexual violence enforces male dominance; I’m pursuing a complementary line of investigation, looking for sources of sexual violence not only in the relations of men with women, but also in the relations of men with each other, and men with themselves. In the feminist consciousness-raising of the mid-sixties women sought freedom from ingrained habits of subservience that had come to feel natural and right. Women freed themselves from themselves: they set their personal stories in an historical context and learned to understand spontaneous impulses as the outcome of social arrangements. “The women’s movement has drawn inescapable and illuminating connections,” wrote Adrienne Rich in 1971, “between our sexual lives and our political institutions.”

Growing boys likewise internalize models of manhood, whose contours present themselves as the shape of reality. Yet we are only beginning to understand the political structures and cultural traditions hidden within masculine experience and to challenge their logic. Fantasies of sexual violence victimize women, as does sexual violence itself; but this fact alone does not explain the grip of such fantasies upon the emotional lives of men, or the tacit permission law-abiding men chronically extend to sexual offenders.

Male dominance is active in the sexually violent pornographic script not merely in the abuse of the female figure by the male, but more powerfully in the way these figures are constructed. “Mary”—the canonical female victim in this scene from The Quaker City—is made to embody male experiences. She is a mirror that reflects a male predicament back into male eyes as though that predicament belongs to a woman rather than a man. Pornographic manhood empties women of their womanly qualities and replaces them with male qualities that men disavow in themselves. Lorrimer and Mary thus enact a manhood divided against itself: ludicrously implausible on its face, their interaction gains coherence and force from the subsurface logic in which the male agent seizes command, and helpless passion is gendered feminine.

Lorrimer plans to seduce Mary by describing a romantic landscape in Wyoming, confident that Mary won’t realize that lust has overpowered her until she is too far gone to resist. Lorrimer—the “man”—embodies deliberate rational scheming; Mary is devoid of self-awareness, a vessel of involuntary passion. “While enchaining the mind of the Maiden, with a story full of Romance, it was his intention to wake her animal nature into full action. And when her veins were all alive with fiery pulsations, when her heart grew animate with sensual life, when her eyes swam in the humid moisture of passion, then she would sink helplessly into his arms, and—like the bird to the snake—flutter to her ruin” (127).

Notice the repetitive phrases, meant to solicit the reader’s engagement in Lorrimer’s scheme, a rhetoric Lippard advances by punctuating the long-winded description of the Wyoming landscape with snapshots of Mary’s breasts being pushed out of her robe by accelerated panting. As the male
reader enters this imaginative schema, he becomes two: identifying with the crafty manipulations of the man, he covertly identifies with the abject passion of the woman. The figure of Lorrimer offers (temporarily) a secure vantage point from which the reader observes the fascinating loss of self-awareness and self command suffered by Mary. In due course, Lorrimer succeeds in arousing desire sufficient to abolish her autonomy, and removes the remaining emblem of her self-containment: “fixing his gaze upon her blue eyes... he slowly flung back the night robe from her shoulders” (132).

Portraits of the quarry—paralysed and throbbing under the eye of the predator—are ubiquitous in *The Quaker City*. Innocent maidens, as well as their polluted sisters, are pictured alluringly asleep or drugged with passion, recapitulating the scenario in which a male aggressor, cynical and resolute, masters the helpless damsel. Yet as the rapist takes control of his victim, he loses control of himself, as the passion masquerading as “Mary’s” suddenly erupts within Lorrimer, and he becomes “a fearful picture of incarnate LUST” (133). Lorrimer becomes the phallus, not as phallocratic, but as abject amid the ungovernable forces released within him. “His face grew purple, and the veins of his eyes filled with thick red blood. He trembled... and his chest heaved and throbbed beneath his white vest, as though he found it difficult to breathe.... Playing with the animal nature of the stainless girl, Lorrimer had aroused the sensual volcano of his own base heart” (132–33).

The pornographic manhood that emerged in antebellum America incessantly produces and consumes a fantasy-drama picturing a self-possessed male aggressor and a woman falling victim to her own desire; yet as the male aggressor consummates his triumph, he succumbs to the volcano of lust. Lorrimer rapes Mary, exactly as he intended, but instead of confirming his self-command, the assault propels him into a nightmare of self-loathing. He is transfixed by the sounding of an “Awful Bell” whose “judgment peal” breaks “on the ear of the Criminal... with a sound that freezes his blood with horror,” announcing “the foul wrong, accomplished in the gaudy Rose Chamber of Monk-hall, by the wretch, who now stood trembling in the darkness” (135).

Competitive self-reliance became a masculine ideal in the early nineteenth century, producing a womanhood defined by sexual purity and its loss, the notorious angel/prostitute dichotomy that is enacted as Mary, “a stainless girl,” becomes “a polluted thing.” Feminist studies of antebellum family life have demonstrated that this binary structure is profoundly misleading, however much women and men during the era of its construction may have internalized it. “The domestic sphere,” fancied as the domain of nurturant womanhood, counterposed against the “heartless world” of male strife, is a model that poorly describes both the sexual politics of the home, and the systems of male collusion at work in political and economic life. This mythology aided in perpetuating male dominance into an era when women were increasingly animated by the democratic ideal of citizen equality. Yet this split vision of the social landscape, and the corresponding split vision of womanhood, also ministered to new patterns of conflict between and within men.
This mythology both managed and concealed the requirements of an emerging split manhood.

What Hawthorne termed “the universal struggle to wrest the means of existence from a host of greedy competitors” demanded new measures of psychic self-containment in the nineteenth century. In the shifting currents of individualist worldly conflict, today’s ally could prove a rival tomorrow, and men ceased to take one another as confidants, turning for emotional solace to their wives. Yet self-containment could not be set aside when the man came home, not least because children had become an economic liability, and the only reliable technique for preventing conception was that of marital abstinence. Following the delights of the honeymoon, in which the first child was often conceived, sexual intercourse in middle-class homes was strictly self-policing.

Set against his fellows by the folkways of competition, the self-sufficient man is set against himself by the whole range of his human vulnerabilities. His need for companionship, his subjection to the contingencies of a market economy, his exposure to illness, to accident and misfortune, to the tumults of his emotional life: the whole burden of what men suffer lay in a zone of experience he can ill afford to acknowledge, since it refutes the ideal of manhood he is compelled to uphold. Within every such man lay the tacit awareness of failing as a man, and women are recruited into the task of coping with this chronic anxiety. The angel/whore dichotomy is one result: the “angel” sustains the man as he wishes to imagine himself, his existence—including his sexuality—blissfully under control. The “whore” embodies the man confused by the volcano in his heart. Imposing this paradox on women has the advantage (for men) of concealing its source in the core dilemmas of self-reliant masculinity. For men to acknowledge these dilemmas as their own would provide an additional confounding instance of male abjection—the lack of self-command that bedevils self-commanding manhood.

The scene from Quaker City reflects this way of organizing male desire. The ostensibly male figure, Lorrimer, embodies the ideal of male control, while Mary enacts the loss of such control. Her increasing subjection to her own desire covertly plays out the involuntary impulses generic to sexual experience for men, but marked as abhorrent and unmanly by the code of self-command. At the climax of the rape, the character of Lorrimer is made to embody this self-horror forcing its way to the surface.

In Dearest Beloved, I argued that Chillingworth and Dimmesdale embody the masculine and feminine components of an autophbic middle-class sexuality, failing to see that this sexuality is also auto-aggressive. Men whose manhood compels them to hate what they conceive as the womanhood in themselves lead psychic lives that are characterized by a continuous internal assault that is gendered male-on-female. The relation of “masculine” to “feminine” as enacted by Chillingworth and Dimmesdale is sexually violent, and the manhood they represent is pornographic. In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne’s “catlike faculty of seeing in the dark,” in Henry James’s words, sees through
Lippard’s conventional scenario to examine the intra-male drama that secretly informs and propels it.\textsuperscript{12}

The story begins with the eroticized punishment of Hester, exposed to public view as the living emblem of sexual sin. Having stitched the “A” with “fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy,” Hester attempts to resist the communal attack, but her gestures of defiance are taken as a provocation, and have the effect of magnifying the gratification that the spectacle provides to those who have gathered to view her punishment.\textsuperscript{13} The book opens, that is, with a scene of pornographic excitement, at the end of which Hester is led back to prison virtually hysterical with agony.

This emotional rape is gendered male-on-female even when those who seek pleasure from it are female. Around the foot of the scaffold, Hawthorne tells us, stand “man-like” women who insist that Hester should suffer a more gratifying penalty. “It were well,” muttered the most iron visaged of the old dames, ‘if we stripped Madam Hester’s rich gown off her dainty shoulders’” (54).

The ardent demand for Hester’s needlework indicates her celebrity: she is a precursor of the sex-goddesses and sex-workers in twentieth-century America, who cater to a sensibility in which sexual excitement is intercut with vengeance and shame. Yet in keeping with the angel/whore dichotomy, she is never hired “to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride” (83). A community-wide transaction springs to life every time she passes along the streets, inspiring guilt and rage because she provokes a desire that is felt as contaminating.

The Scarlet Letter draws the reader into a hall of mirrors that endlessly replicates the drama of male-on-female sexual cruelty. Consider the emotional life of Arthur Dimmesdale. The target of Arthur’s self-torture is female, namely his liability to runaway emotion, including runaway desire. Dimmesdale too becomes a sexual celebrity, inaugurating a tradition of preacher-seducers that runs through Henry Ward Beecher to Elmer Gantry to Jimmy Swaggart, public men who possess a charisma whose erotic power remains intact only so long as it remains invisible to the public. Arthur has professional reasons for cultivating his emotional pain, but he also derives intimate satisfaction from the access it gives him to sexual passion. The violence that the “manly” Arthur brings against the “womanly” Arthur is auto-erotic, it is a self-rape. He languishes in the toils of a contaminated femininity and lashes himself into a frenzy of loathing, which is also a frenzy of arousal. “In Mr. Dimmesdale’s secret closet, under lock and key, there was a bloody scourge. Oftentimes . . . [he] had plied it on his own shoulders; laughing bitterly at himself the while, and smiting so much the more pitilessly, because of that bitter laugh” (144).

Roger Chillingworth similarly dramatizes male-on-female sexual violence; his inner torture mirrors Arthur’s, with the difference that he does not recognize his torment as his own. Roger cannot control his own compulsive self-
control. When he sees his wife Hester on the scaffold, with another man’s child in her arms, his emotional convulsion is “so instantaneously controlled by an effort of his will, that, save at a single moment, [his] expression might have passed for calmness” (61). The passions that rage in Dimmesdale’s life are equally forceful in Roger’s life, but are hidden from others and from himself. Roger makes Arthur Dimmesdale into a “woman,” upon whom to project his disavowed emotional torments, and a pornographic enchantment with the troubled clergymen soon overcomes him. Roger proposes to carry out an investigation that will disclose the identity of Hester’s lover; but no such investigation occurs. Roger is devoted not to discovering Arthur’s guilt, but to tantalizing and prodding him so as to enhance it. He gives Arthur poisons that keep him alive and keep him in pain.

Like contemporary pornographers and the velociraptors of the religious right—to say nothing of Bill Clinton and Kenneth Starr—Roger and Arthur are enmeshed by the same obsessions. Roger’s torture of Arthur and Arthur’s self-torture are versions of the same intramale sexual assault, and they equally contribute to the lesion that appears on Arthur’s chest.

Hawthorne invokes the rhythms of sexual climax in the moment when Roger invades most fully the intimacy of his feminine double, but not the rhythms of a sexuality at home with itself. What Roger experiences is the convulsive loss of control that George Lippard depicts in Lorimer’s triumph. It is an orgasm experienced as polluting, “a ghastly rapture . . . bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure,” which comes upon Roger as he—again like Lorimer—lays his hand on Arthur’s “bosom” and “thrusts aside” the robe that covers it (138). Roger then feasts his eyes on the core emblem through which Hawthorne explores the psychology of pornographic manhood. The scarlet letter on Arthur’s breast was produced by the sexualized hatred that Roger feels for Arthur in collaboration with the hatred that Arthur feels for himself.

The ostensible logic of the final scaffold scene says that divine justice has done its office, because Arthur has a copy of Hester’s letter seared into his breast. But there is a deeper logic saying the reverse.

Hester’s letter is a copy of Arthur’s. Her public designation as a “fallen” woman is a gesture of the manhood at work in Arthur’s self-torture, and in Chillingworth’s vengeance. The punishment Hester suffers and the brand she wears are the outward and visible sign of a masculine spiritual pathology that remains secretive and inward. Hawthorne intimates this reverse logic, though he does not spell it out. Arthur pulls open his shirt in a chapter entitled “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter,” as though the letter had never before been revealed (248). The letter on Hester’s breast was merely a phantom, not the real thing at all, but only its product and reflection. As Dimmesdale proclaims, “Hester’s scarlet letter . . . with all its mysterious horror . . . is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast” (255).

The society depicted in The Scarlet Letter is the society of pornographic manhood, with an endemic sexual violence that draws women into its invis-
ible logic. Hawthorne’s narrative does not work out a solution to the male-on-female sexual abuse that it so pervasively depicts, but in Hester Prynne he dramatizes the struggle of women to disentangle themselves from this enslavement, and to find lives of independent self-respect, and to define an autonomous sexual selfhood. Men likewise may find inspiration in Hester, as we seek to rework the manhood that dooms us to pornographic enchantments and cripples our capacity for intimacy with real women.

Notes

This essay is taken from a book-length project on sexual violence and American manhood.


5 George Lippard, The Quaker City; or, the Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime (1970; Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1995).


