

SURRENDERED WOMEN, VIOLENT FEMINISTS AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

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In about the fourth week of my media literacy class each semester, I begin by asking how many students see themselves as "feminists." Usually, about six people out of about 130 raise their hands. This, in a class with more females than males. So, we turn to a dictionary definition, to see what feminism means. The first (Webster's) definition is "the theory of political, social and economic equality between the sexes." So, now I ask if anyone *doesn't* believe in equality between genders. Now, no one puts up their hand.

I point out that if people are being honest, according to the dictionary definition, we are all feminists in this class. Perhaps not "radical" feminists, or socialist feminists, but possibly liberal feminists, in that we believe in equality.

So, why the aversion to calling ourselves feminists? My suggestion is that feminists have been portrayed in such a negative fashion by the mass media, that this explains our reluctance to publicly identify with the word, let alone the movement. Not only that, but the male-dominated media have, for decades, promoted a backlash against feminism, as well as depicting women in stereotypical, "traditional," and sexist ways. They are able to do this with relative impunity because we live in a patriarchy. And, after we define "patriarchy," and discuss the gender of most politicians, CEOs, and professors, most students seem to agree with this.

Among the ways the media do these things is by excusing, ignoring and ultimately promoting male violence against women. As any proficient dictator knows, if you keep people living in fear, this will go a long way towards controlling them. The portrayal of violence was apparent almost twenty years ago, with the 1989 reporting and analysis of the Montreal Massacre, the shooting of 14 women at a Montreal college by Marc Lepine. The event was mostly treated as a random act of violence, and Lepine was portrayed as a mere lunatic, influenced by violent films, rather than as a misogynistic woman-hater whose actions are deeply rooted in our paternalistic and sexist society.

This was not an isolated event. In previous research I elaborated the case study of Tracey Lynne Kelsh, a Windsor, Ontario woman who was brutally stabbed to death by her boyfriend of about one month, Dennis James Edgar. The reporting in *The Windsor Star* was a classic example of blaming the victim, as may be seen from the headline and opening paragraphs. (Winter, 2002).

Her path became 'a death spiral':

Tragic ending to a 'crazy life.'

As a kid, Tracey Lynn Kelsh had a hard time obeying the crossing guards when she walked to school. From there, she followed her own path, a path into what her stepfather Bill Prestanski called 'a death spiral.' "Tracey is a textbook case of someone in society that didn't want to go along with the standard way of doing things," he said from his home in Forest Glade, late Monday night. "She always said she could take care of herself. I guess she was wrong." Early Sunday morning, 22-year-old Tracey Lynn Kelsh became the city's second murder victim of the year. Police said her throat was slashed during a violent struggle. It was the end of the line for a local girl who grew up too fast, her stepfather said, and turned her back on those who wanted to help her get her life back on track. (Sinkevitch, 1994).

The year after the murder of Ms. Kelsh, news media such as *The Globe and Mail* were busy promoting the (unscientific) views of Senator Anne Cools, who told an Ottawa meeting on International Women's Day that "behind every abusing husband is an abusing mother," effectively blaming women themselves for men's violence against women. (Winter, 2002:34).

The news media love women like Anne Cools, erstwhile or "reformed" progressives and feminists who are pawns in the backlash against feminism: antifeminists or "pseudo feminists" posing as feminists. The news media hire these women (Barbara Amiel, Donna LaFramboise, Margaret Wentte), or publicize and promote their views through reportage, interviews, book reviews, *et cetera*. Here is Margaret Wentte of *The Globe and Mail*, writing about Anne Cools:

How did Anne Cools change from champion of battered women to renegade antifeminist? Ms. Cools argues that she hasn't changed at all. It's the women's movement that has. "The radicals have hijacked the agenda," she said two years ago. "They see men as evil, and will stop at nothing to ensure the superiority of women." (Wentte, 1997).

It's in part due to the constant repetition of this mantra depicting feminists as radicals who promote the superiority of women, that

many students are unwilling to associate themselves with the label of feminist.

Another part of the backlash—and the promotion of male violence—may involve the celebration of terrible and harmful books. One example is the work of Katie Roiphe, who was a 25-year-old graduate student at Princeton University when she wrote *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*, in the nineties. Roiphe wrote that sexual violence against women by men can be explained by mass hysteria fomented by “man-hating fanatics.” Research for her book was largely based on her personal experiences and those of her close friends; her review of the academic literature was largely restricted to a 1985 article in *Ms. Magazine*. Her albeit convoluted and inconsistent thesis was that date rape was a myth, fabricated by young women who felt guilty about having sex.

The U.S. media loved Roiphe’s book, which received a cover story in *Time* magazine, a favorable cover story review in *The New York Times Review of Books*, and glowing articles almost everywhere. The Times alone gave her career a boost with a half-dozen promotional articles. (Media Education Foundation: 1994).

Sometimes it’s not violence *per se* which is being promoted or defended, constituting the backlash, but an otherwise backward or regressive perspective on women’s roles in society. My least favorite example of this genre is that of *The Surrendered Wife*. It is a more recent incarnation of *The Real Woman* movement. I first learned of this phenomenon from a full-page review article in the conservative *National Post*, of Toronto (Laurence, 2000). The article, originally from the London *Daily Telegraph*, and run elsewhere in Canada, tells the story of Laura Doyle, and her husband John. After four years of marriage, things were rocky. Laura saw her husband as a slob who wouldn’t do anything, including picking up his dirty laundry. She sought out couples therapy, but to her surprise the woman therapist concluded Laura herself had the problem: “control issues.” Now, it’s not that some women and men don’t have control issues, but from Laura’s own description, she was merely trying to get John to pick up his clothing from the floor and to stop being a slob.

Here, the reviewer injected his own interpretation: “This is a polite, shrink-speak way of saying that Laura had become a bossy wife from hell, who had driven John to cower in front of the television rather than talk to her.”

Next comes Laura’s voice: “I am a feminist and it was just natural to me to be an assertive woman,” says Laura. “And then suddenly I realized that to the man I love, I was a shrew.” So, feminists are shrews.

According to the reviewer, Laura “resolved to bite her tongue, be polite, pleasant and respectful, and let John make the decisions, just as an old-fashioned man should. More than that she would surrender to his every whim and would even hand over all her money.”

Laura quit her job as an executive in advertising, and now works from home as a freelance copy writer.

Laura says, “A surrendered wife always says ‘yes’ and is always available for sex....The surrendered wife will do anything, anywhere, as long as it does not hurt. Since you’re the woman, come to the bedroom looking as feminine as possible. The first rule for a great sex life is to be respectful and wear something sheer and lacy.”

It goes beyond sex. Laura counsels that women should practice taping over their mouths with duct tape, to help them to learn to keep respectfully quiet in the presence of their man.

The reviewer next comments that Laura’s “retro-philosophy tilts against the windmills of two generations of received wisdom from the cultural elite, among whom there is an uproar at the notion of ‘surrender.’” There are three brief paragraphs devoted to this criticism.

Her critics see her disseminating a particularly refined version of the conservative values already aired in books [then lists four of them]...“The concept of the surrendered wife is personally offensive and scientifically unfounded,” storms John Gottman, a psychologist who hit the American best-seller lists with his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. “Laura is a dinosaur and a throwback.” Gottman preaches that men must make more effort to be ‘influenced’ by their wives, and that couples should stay ‘emotionally connected.’

So, according to the journalist, the opposition to Laura’s retro-philosophy only comes from “the cultural elite,” or leftist intellectuals. Notice how psychologist Gottman “storms” and “preaches,” in the short space he is allotted, before the article moves to a lengthy rebuttal by Laura Doyle. According to Doyle, such advice is condemning women to divorce, single motherhood, and unhappiness, whereas she is trying “to empower” women to enjoy long, happy and fulfilled relationships.

In the final paragraph, the writer concludes his endorsement of Laura Doyle and her concept of *The Surrendered Wife*.

A dose of surrender could become the equivalent of the old village ducking-stool for scolds. A good cold dunking, according to this philosophy, might just lead to a nice warm relationship. Any takers?

If this reaction to *The Surrendered Wife* was atypical, that would be one thing. But the conservative *National Post* was not alone. Doyle was featured on NBC's *Dateline*, in *Time* magazine, and in the *New York Times*, and catapulted to the top ten book list on Amazon.com. A mostly favorable review in *The Toronto Star* which also ran in the *Ottawa Citizen* and *Calgary Herald*, commented,

Doyle's reputation started spreading when friends noticed the change in her relationship and gathered to learn how she did it. They, in turn, drew in more women. Today, thousands attend weekly "surrendering" meetings that are scattered throughout the United States, and others meet online for the same purpose. (Harlow, 2001).

Much of the reporting or reviewing functions to promote the book, as this example from *The Vancouver Province* illustrates.

Surrender, submit and succeed, ladies

LOS ANGELES -- Surrender and succeed, ladies.

Laura Doyle, a California housewife who's whipped up a media frenzy by encouraging women to please their men, is about to cash in big.

The 33-year-old advertising copywriter promotes the philosophy that women are happiest when they obey their husbands at all times.

She says women should submit to sex whenever their husbands wish, but never demand satisfaction for themselves. They should also forgive indiscretions when away from home.

These two rules, claims Doyle, are the secret of a happy marriage, and rescued her own.

Simon & Schuster, publisher of her manual, *The Surrendered Wife*, has just doubled its print-run of her book to 100,000 copies for publication this week in light of media interest.

A woman reviewer in *The Montreal Gazette* wrote that her mother use to tell her in the 1970s, "You liberated women are going to make men weak and then you won't want them. You'll be sorry." Naturally, I ignored her. Now I'm wondering if she was simply ahead of her time." She goes on to complain about the "docile language" of the book, but otherwise:

For a self-help book, *The Surrendered Wife* is not all that extreme. The basic principles: giving a partner some space and the respect to follow his own best judgments seem sound to me. So does the reminder that there is little satisfaction in trying to control a man's preferences, whether for loud ties or line of work. This is Humanity 101. (Iovine, 2001).

Somehow, the reviewer overlooked women's humanity, and the obvious basic principle of the book: women should subjugate themselves to their partners, in the interest of a 'happy and peaceful' marriage.

Of course, not all of the responses were positive. But any criticism was muted. In *The Kingston Whig-Standard*—which also ran the positive review article from *The Daily Telegraph/National Post* above, by Charles Laurence—an ostensibly critical review provided a substantially positive recounting of the book's content, and the

reaction to it, for about 700 words. It was only in the final paragraph of the article, when few would still be reading, that it concluded as follows:

Doyle is a throwback of the worst sort, advocating deception and manipulation to achieve intimacy, and compounding the foolishness of her ideas by sprinkling pithy quotes from the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa and Eleanor Roosevelt through the book. She sounds like a recovered control freak in need of lessons in mutual respect, and her ideas can only lead women into agonies of pent-up rage and co-dependency. (Fortney, 2001).

When Laura Doyle later began writing what she called a “prequel” to her first book—this time for single women—the news media ran promotional stories months in advance of publication, and again greeted the new book’s retrograde philosophy with acclaim. (Cryderman, 2001; Craig & Milner, 2001).

There are numerous ways in which the media undermine feminists and women generally. As with visible minorities, one way is by largely excluding women (let alone feminists) from parity in newsrooms, let alone management and leadership roles in news organizations. (Pozner, 2000). In addition, the media such as *The Globe and Mail* use three central methods in their war on feminists. The first means, which Anne Cools exemplifies, is to find quotable public persona, and use them to cudgel the opposition, in this case feminists. This is an old journalistic trick, amply demonstrated when Senator Joseph McCarthy was used to thrash the alleged “communists” in the U.S. in the 1950s. When someone in authority says something the media are anxious to hear, it is quotable and reportable by virtue of this very fact, regardless of whether there is any evidence to support them. On the other hand, of course, all the statistics in the world won’t get you a hearing in the media if your arguments don’t have resonance. Authoritative sources are not limited to senators, but may include other politicians, neo-liberal academics, business leaders, authors, and anyone with “the right stuff.”

To be fair to the media, there is a very well-heeled lobby group which is promoting the antifeminist cause. Part of the reason for its success is due to media coverage, but it also has to do with funding and massive public relations campaigns which the media would find difficult to resist, even if they wanted to. (Winter, 2002).

The second method is to hire people like Margaret Wentz, who will espouse her perspective *ad nauseam*, and which is indistinguishable from that of conservative White males, periodically

sprinkling her columns with the views of those very same men, or other men-in-skirts such as Senator Cools. (See also Levant, 2000). A recent example of Wente's work relates to the election of Arnold Schwarzeneger as Governor of California, in 2003. Allegations of sexual abuse arose over "Governor Groper," who was accused of grabbing women's breasts and buttocks, making lewd comments and even trying to strip a woman wearing a bathing suit in an elevator. Wente wrote in *The Globe and Mail*,

Gray Davis's sins are way worse than Arnie's. Voters sense a sleaze campaign. And there's actually a lot to like about the big guy. . .It's possible that Governor Groper is the best thing to happen to Republicans in years. He could do the world a favour and reclaim the party from its Southern social-moralist wing. And maybe he'll help put sexual behaviour back in its place in public discourse -- as neither the least nor most important thing about a person's character, but simply one (extremely interesting) factor among many. What a relief that would be. (Wente, 2003).

The third method involves taking reputable academic research and distorting it out of all recognition and proportion, to the chagrin of its authors, in order to further your own antifeminist and misogynist agenda. In one example of this, Southam News claimed in 1999 that feminism "made" girls angry, pointing to a study whose authors later denied finding any such results. (Surette, 1999). "We didn't say anything about feminism being responsible. We didn't mention feminism at all," Kirsten Madsen, one of the psychologists who participated in the study, said later in an interview. (Winter, 2002:51).

The backlash against feminism and the biased representation of women is not just restricted to the news media. Ever listen to the lyrics of Neil Young's song, *Down by the River*? Apparently, he shot his baby dead for no reason other than the fact that she could take him "over the rainbow." Or what about The Beatles, who counsel: "Run for your life if you can, little girl, catcha with another man, that's the end-uh, little girl." As Polachok (1992) notes, the ever-popular golden oldie music is replete with rampant sexism and misogyny. And, is today's rap and hip-hop music any better?

Children's animated films, with few exceptions eliminate or downplay female roles, as in Disney's *Lion King*, and when there are female leads, they tend to have a very limited view of what women's life can entail. For example, Belle in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is a voracious reader who consumes every book in the local library and yearns for "more than this provincial life," but can't seem to aspire beyond taming and marrying a violent beast/prince. (Maio, 1998).

What kind of role model is this? Women are marginalized (*The Lion King*, *Toy Story*, *Peter Pan*), cast as wicked villains (*The Lion King II*, Snow White's stepmother, *The Rescuers Down Under*, *101 Dalmations*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*) killed off early (*Bambi*, *Finding Nemo*) or portrayed as beautiful, thin waifs, usually requiring rescue by males (Pocahontas, Ariel, Thumbelina, Tinker Bell, Princess Jasmine). More recently, Holly Hunter as Elastagirl (not Elastawoman) in *The Incredibles* (Pixar/Disney, 2004) is a superhero who is appalled by her own ample posterior, and can't manage her children's behavior at the dinner table without appealing for rescue to her husband, Mr. Incredible.

Like the Robin Williams's role in the 1993 Fox film *Mrs. Doubtfire*, a central story line of the media is that men are loving creatures who just want to be with their kids, while women (Sally Fields) are obsessive-compulsive creatures who don't want a good man if it means a messy house. Of course, some men are loving and some women are obsessive, and vice-versa. But when will Robin don a wig and play a single mom whose ex-husband refuses to see the kids and refuses to pay support? Single moms in films are far more likely to be Julia Roberts as Erin Brockovich: beautiful, thin, busty women who break men's balls to further their careers, meanwhile abandoning their children to loving, dishwashing male boyfriends. How typical!

Everywhere throughout the media, women's role models are impossibly thin, airbrushed perfection, promoting anorexia, bulimia, and relentless insecurities. While males have handsome and bulked-up stereotypes to live up to as well, the expectations for females are much more pervasive and stringent. Girls internalize these messages at young ages, leading to negative perceptions of their weight and shape, and the belief that unnatural thinness is ideal. Attitudes towards thinness and ideal body size are formed as early as three years of age. By elementary school age, girls fear looking fat more than losing their parents, getting cancer or a nuclear war. (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998).

The news and entertainment media are owned and run by wealthy White conservative males, many of whom hold these dated, "traditional," and sexist views about women. As long as these men are in control, not just of the media but the political process, we can expect that media content will primarily reflect and promote their views.

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